

Suellen Rocca

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY



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**Couplet Song for Suellen and
Curly Head Dream Girls of the 1960s**

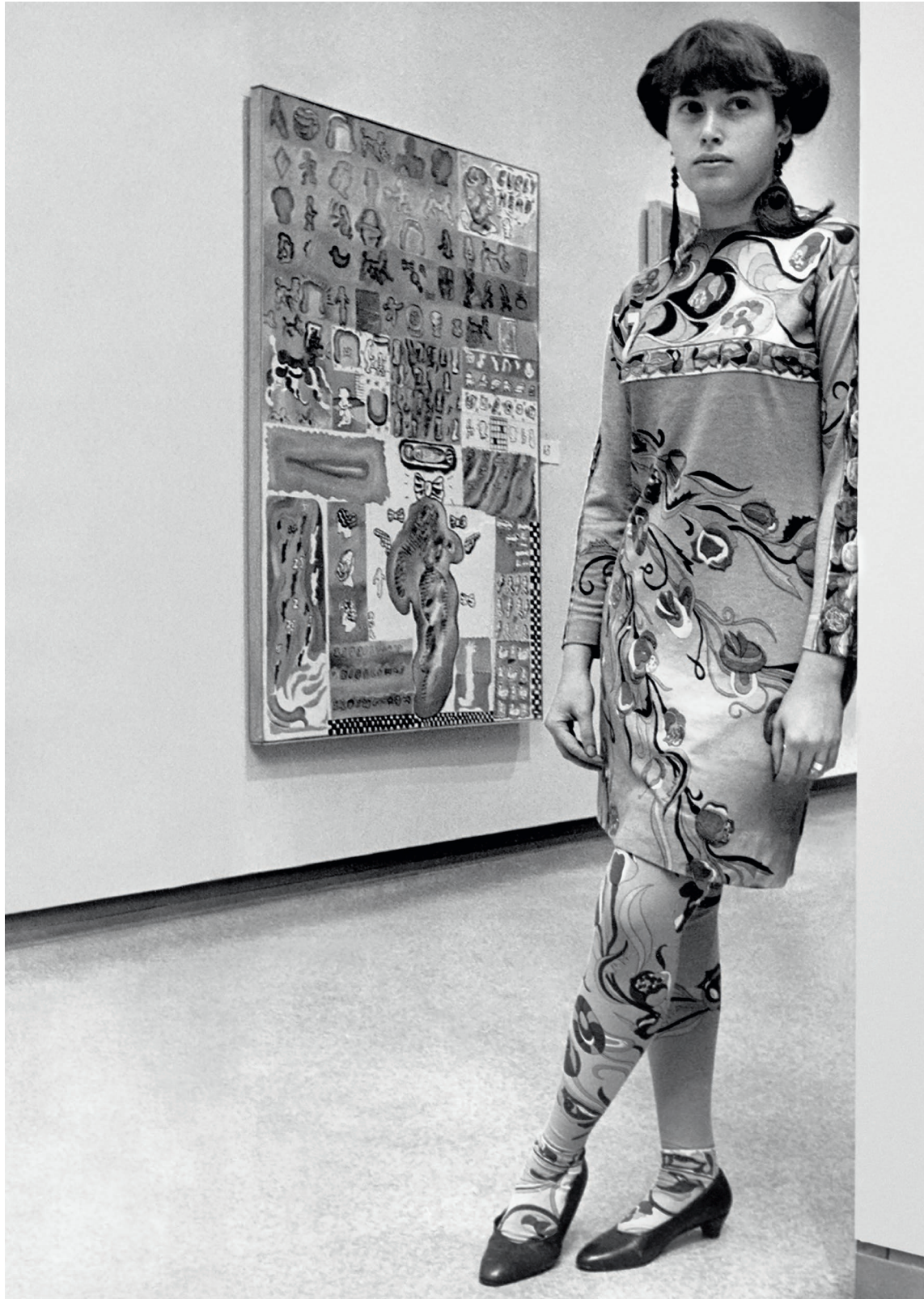
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Suellen Rocca with *Curley Head* (c. 1966) in "The 70th Annual Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity" at the Art Institute of Chicago, 1967

The Repeating Beauty of Suellen Rocca

DAN NADEL

A lot of images about comfort-caress-sex. Rings, couples, dancing, lamps, legs, wigs, purses, palm trees, hands. Very painty surfaces, worked into + changed. Largest canvases are the most exciting with catalogues of events and images. Her studio is very nice. Big, white, a painting rack and easel and supplies, a bulletin board, drawings tacked around, and collected things. [...] Suellen's handling of color and catalogue images fascinate me.

— Christina Ramberg on Suellen Rocca¹

Suellen Rocca's *Bare Shouldered Beauty* (1965) [p. 31] centers on a female form rendered in subtly modulated gray, right arm tucked behind her head, left arm akimbo, both hands disappearing into her hairdo. Her ambiguous body mass terminates in a pair of high-heeled shoes. Cascading stripes and the numeral 2 cover her head and upper torso. There is a target on her chest, and televisions in place of breasts. Accompanying this bare-shouldered beauty are three smaller versions, each stepped down in scale with a face obscured by either a cloud of bare canvas or undulating black lines. All around the four figures are tiny vignettes and glyphs of ice cream cones, dancers, poodles, socks, hands, chairs, sofas, swans, and cups, as well as multiple grids containing yet more glyphs. Everything is painted matter-of-factly in dusky red, gray, green, purple, brown, and yellow. There's no attempt at painterly illusion or artifice. Where there is no subject to render, the canvas is left bare.

With all its repeating motifs, rippling lines, and confidently casual craft, *Bare Shouldered Beauty* is a map of a particular kind of female life in mid-twentieth-century America. The figure is based on an image from the brassiere section of a 1964 Sears catalogue [fig. 1]. The painting is a nakedly personal statement of young, middle-class womanhood: I have children, I have things, I have this body and these stories; I am real, yet I am also anonymous, covered, idealized. The work reveals and communicates through its component glyphs and scenes, which want to be known, and which want the viewer to know the artist.² Rocca's work is an implicit rebuke to the winking appropriation of pinup art by Mel Ramos and Roy Lichtenstein, to the ironic distancing of Pop appropriation in general, to the modernist emphasis on object over subject, and to the concealment of biography so common among painters at the time.

The subject of Rocca's art is what she calls the "visual language of romance and feminine happiness":

Palm trees, diamond rings, bra styles in the Sears Roebuck catalogue, dancing couples from Arthur Murray ads, and pictures of fancy hairdos tucked into the back pages of magazines were the cultural icons of beauty and romance expressed by the media that promised happiness to young women of that generation. This was the culture that surrounded me.³

With its emphasis on subject expressed through singular means, Rocca's work can be identified within the framework that Robert Storr described at length in the catalogue that accompanied his exhibition "Modern Art Despite Modernism":



Fig 1. Spring 1964 Sears catalogue

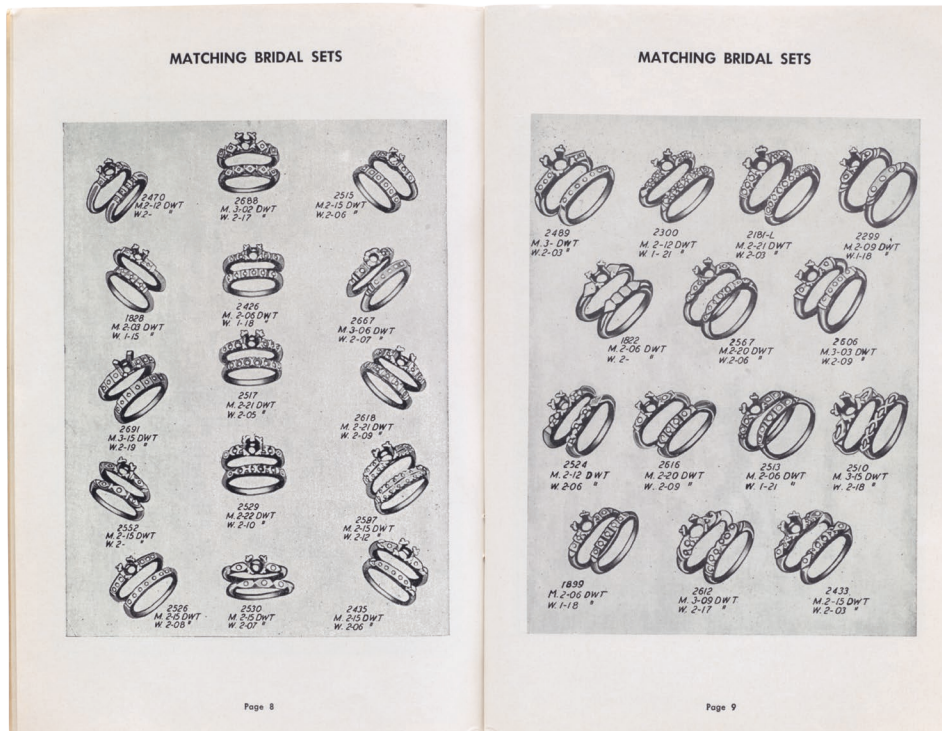


Fig. 2. Wholesale jewelry catalogue, c. 1965

Before modernist art is about anything else — an image, a symbol, the communication of an experience — it is about the logic and structure of the thing that carries meaning, and about how the thing came into being. In this respect, all modernist art is essentially abstract, even though only some modernist art looks it.⁴

Rocca's work is modern art but not *modernist* — it needs to communicate about its subject.⁵

Rocca shares this sensibility with a generation of artists who came of age in mid-century Chicago. She first gained national attention with the Hairy Who, a group of six artists who exhibited under that moniker from 1966 to 1969 in Chicago, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. All attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in the early 1960s and remained in the city after graduating; most had also grown up in Chicago. The Hairy Who exhibitions presented a homegrown art style that trafficked in highly personal visual languages rendered in bold lines and exuberant colors, embracing an omnivorous array of influences, from pre-Columbian art and Joan Miró to barbershop signage.

But before the Hairy Who, Suellen Krupp was a prodigy raised into art by her supportive Jewish family on the north side of Chicago. The city itself was a place of vibrant, clanging contrasts: amid the modernist landmarks and beneath the skyscrapers and the elevated train were people steeped in the grit of industry. "I was a good student," Rocca says. "I always finished my work in plenty of time, and then I would draw. When I was in third grade, my teacher collected all my drawings at the end of the class and hung them in the hall outside my classroom. It was my first exhibition! She called my mother and told her to sign me up for classes at the Art Institute, which my mother did." These classes were held in the museum's grand Fullerton Hall and were incubators for a number of prominent artists, including Rocca's future Hairy Who compatriots Gladys Nilsson and Karl Wirsum. At age eight, the young Rocca was drawing from a live model and carrying her sketchbook everywhere. Recalling her childhood interest in visual culture, she says she was "almost devout about high art. I wasn't actually interested in comic books as a child."⁶ In 1960, just sixteen years old, she entered college at the SAIC. Rocca says she "grew up in the Art Institute. It was like a second home."

In that second home Rocca found a formative influence in Ray Yoshida, her first-year drawing teacher, at the time a thirty-two-year-old artist just finding his own footing. Yoshida, she notes, "was able to see things in your work, possibilities and directions that you didn't even know of. And he would very quietly come by and drop a book next to you. It might be Kandinsky or whoever, and allow you to make the connection. He emphasized that anything could be an influence." Yoshida became a mentor to Rocca, encouraging her and her fellow students to follow their instincts rather than subscribe to any rigid ideology.

She, along with members of the Hairy Who and other artists eventually known as the Imagists, learned art history from Whitney Halstead, an artist-turned-historian who was mentored by another artist-turned-historian at SAIC, Kathleen Blackshear. Halstead, following and expanding on Blackshear's tradition, gave equal weight to the fine art at the Art Institute and the natural history collections at the Field Museum. This broadened frame of reference was encouraged by Jean Dubuffet in his 1951 lecture "Anticultural Positions" at the Arts Club of Chicago. It's instructive to read Halstead's later description of the talk and its impact:

The point that [Dubuffet] emphasized most was his concluding idea that Western civilization had formulated a false dichotomy of values when it set beauty in opposition to ugliness. For Dubuffet this was a complete misperception, and he argued



Fig. 3. Michael Hurson, *Ballet of the Left-Handed Piano*, 1962. Oil and charcoal on canvas. 88 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 69 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches; 234 x 177 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Joseph N. Eisendrath Purchase Prize Fund, 1963.378



Fig. 4. Marc Chagall, *White Crucifixion*, 1938. Oil on canvas. 60 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 55 inches; 155 x 150 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of Alfred S. Alschuler, 1946.925



Fig. 5. Egyptian wall fragment from the tomb of Amenemhet and his wife Hemet, Middle Kingdom, Dynasty 12 (1991-1784 BC). Limestone, pigment. 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches; 31 x 41.5 x 6.5 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Museum Purchase Fund, 1920.262

that the canons of taste growing out of such a false position must be shifted or even reversed. The effect of Dubuffet's talk was limited at the time. [...] Only gradually did [his ideas] coincide with attitudes that began to prevail among the artists and a keener, more receptive audience. The reasons for the change in attitudes among Chicago's artists are complex, but an important factor in bringing about the change was the more intense use made of the museum collections. [...] Of greatest importance were the collections of the Field Museum of Natural History.⁷

Like Dubuffet, Halstead and his students weren't interested in binary oppositions or the modernist arrow of progress; they saw the entire playing field as level. Things were what they were — nothing needed to exist “against” anything else. Art was art. This stoic, rather Midwestern philosophy would prove to be foundational. Halstead's encyclopedic and nonhierarchical slide lectures might mix late-medieval Italian and Northern Renaissance paintings, nature drawings, Mesoamerican pottery, Senofo tribal masks, American Indian artifacts, paintings by Miró and Dubuffet, Nazca and Oceania objects, and hand-painted signs. Nothing was off the table, and nothing was fetishized as “other.” And so Rocca might reference Marc Chagall and Peter Saul as readily as her kindergarten activity books or the voluminous jewelry catalogues she saw at her husband's family business, Rocca Jewelers [fig. 2].

Rocca's sensibility took root at a particularly interesting time in the Chicago art world. There was much to see in the city — including museum shows by Dubuffet, Balthus, Max Beckmann, and other highly individualistic artists⁸ — but relatively few opportunities for young artists. A handful of galleries exhibited contemporary work, including Allan Frumkin, which showed Peter Saul, H. C. Westermann, William Copley, and Roberto Matta. The annual Exhibition Momentum shows, which ran from 1948 to 1957, united figurative expressionists such as Cosmo Campoli, Seymour Rosofsky, Nancy Spero, Leon Golub, and June Leaf. But there was not much more.

Fortunately, local collectors supported young artists who stayed in town after graduation. These were some of the same collectors who welcomed Dubuffet in 1951, and who supported a lively trade in twentieth-century European painting. The best Chicago collections, according to Dennis Adrian, were not homogeneous and were mostly cultivated by women.⁹ These included two of particular importance to Rocca: the collection of Lindy and Edwin Bergman and that of Ruth and Leonard J. Horwich. Adrian notes, “The often predominating Surrealism could be accompanied by and given significant context by various tribal arts, popular objects, and a very wide variety of areas of visual interest, including new works by artists in Chicago. This meant that both the artists of the 1950s and later the Imagists entered readily into collections which presented both the contexts and competition of many or most of the major directions of modern and contemporary art.”¹⁰

One aspect of this openness, particularly for the artists of the 1960s, is that Chicago had long been supportive of women in the arts. It was a frontier town — women were important from the beginning — and it was socially permeable, without the rigidity of a social structure carried over from Europe. With that flexibility came an acceptance of women in art as far back as the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, for which Sophia Hayden Bennett designed the Women's Building, showcasing the advancement of women throughout history, which was adorned with a fifty-eight-foot-long, overtly protofeminist mural by Mary Cassatt titled *Modern Woman*. Important Chicago-based female artists over the years included Evelyn Statsinger, Miyoko Ito, Julia Thecla, Kathryn Carloye, and two influential SAIC teachers: Vera Berdich in the



Fig. 6. Three paintings (at left) by Suellen Rocca, including *Paul's Umbrella Painting* (1968) [p. 43], in "Now! Hairy Who Makes You Smell Good" at the Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, 1968, with paintings by Jim Nutt and sculptures by Karl Wirsum

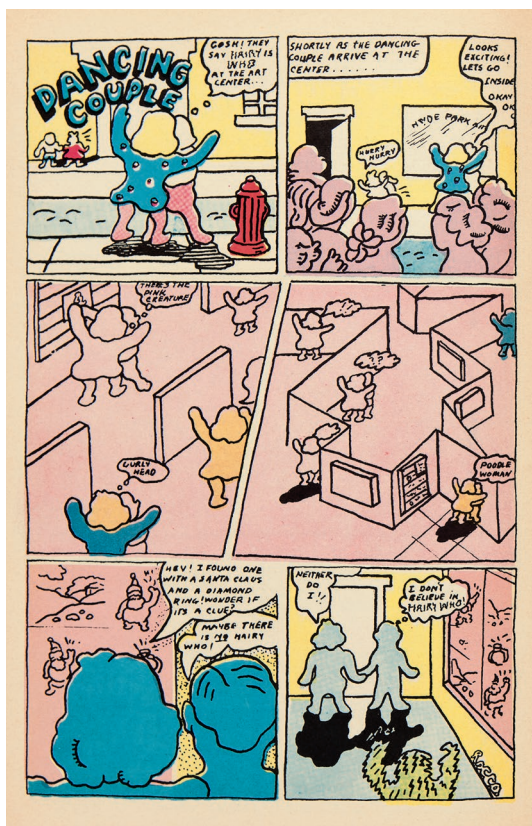
printmaking department¹¹ and Kathleen Blackshear in art history. It's also easy to divine such support from the exhibitions organized by Don Baum at the Hyde Park Art Center, which always featured women and men in equal numbers. An artist's gender just wasn't an issue. Sarah Canright, who studied at the SAIC and participated in the formative Imagist shows at the Hyde Park Art Center (a facility mostly led by women), is one of the few artists from that cohort to land in New York in 1972. She described the difference: "[In Chicago] the male artists took us as seriously as they did themselves, and so did the collectors who bought our art. This translated to the Art Institute and the newly formed MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] as well. As art began to sell, it seemed the majority of attention went to the male artists, but that never affected the internal dynamics of the Imagists. When Edward and I moved to New York, the struggle for women to be taken seriously was a rude surprise."¹²

And so, in early-1960s Chicago, this gifted young artist, Suellen Rocca, flourished. Among her classmates she was considered, according to Jim Nutt, the most artistically confident and mature in her year. Rocca's energy and daring at such a young age became an example to her classmates and, later, to a new generation of artists. As a student, she admired her slightly older contemporary Michael Hurson, whose 1962 student painting *Ballet of the Left-Handed Piano* was acquired and exhibited by the Art Institute the following year [fig. 3]. Hurson (as well as his classmate Elizabeth Murray), like Rocca, was interested in drawing in paint, serial imagery, objects of comfort, and clustered images on large canvases.

By the time she graduated in 1964 she was well versed in a variety of visual cultures and comfortable with painting on an unusually large scale. Many of her works depict objects that embody postadolescent longing, incipient sexuality, and the transition to early adulthood. In paintings like *Chocolate Chip Cookie* and *Bare Shouldered Beauty and the Pink Creature* (both 1965) [pp. 33 and 39] she uses a catalogue-like format to enumerate the objects of her fascination: hats, rings, boxes, cookies, dresses, bananas, and dancers (which in the former painting float across the two panels, uniting and animating them). All are underpinned by clouds of a single color, and marked by scale shifts and multiple borders composed of objects. Rocca's pictorial vocabulary is partially drawn from her childhood memories of kindergarten workbooks, or pre-readers [p. 82]. Of these publications she observes, "A man with a hat, a house, a dog — expressed as simple line drawings — so surreal in their incongruity and change in scale. A visual language expressed as simple pictures — icons — like hieroglyphs. Santa Claus, swans, poodles, socks, chairs, sofas, etc. All are familiar images with instant cultural recognition. These pre-readers also reminded me of the excitement I felt emerging into the larger world of school as a cherished and overprotected only child."

Suellen's Corness Painting (1967) [p. 47] takes its window format from a cornice in the furnace room next to her knotty-pine studio. Here is a quasi-allegorical depiction of her life: two curtains, festooned with imagery, pulled back to reveal an enormous wood-grain ice cream cone. In her 1967 work *Cha-Cha Couple (Dance Game)* [p. 50], as in *Bare Shouldered Beauty*, Rocca takes one of her usual motifs, in this case the silhouette of a dancing couple, and maps it with shapes and glyphs. But unlike the sexual power conceded by *Bare Shouldered Beauty*, *Cha-Cha Couple* (like *Corness*) seems to reflect more on the idea of domesticity and responsibility than idealized romance. It enumerates all the *other* things one could/should be doing while romancing.

Gradually Rocca's glyphs became recombinant building blocks — a profile and an umbrella fused into a woman with an umbrella for a body (*Paul's Umbrella Painting*, 1968) [p. 41] — or were used individually to "write" visual sentences with layers of associative meaning. These line drawings were not transferred to canvas mechanically; Rocca drew them



**Figs. 7 and 8. Pages by Suellen Rocca in *The Portable Hairy Who!* (1966) and *Hairy Who* (1968).
Offset lithography on paper. Each page 11 x 7 inches; 28 x 18 cm**

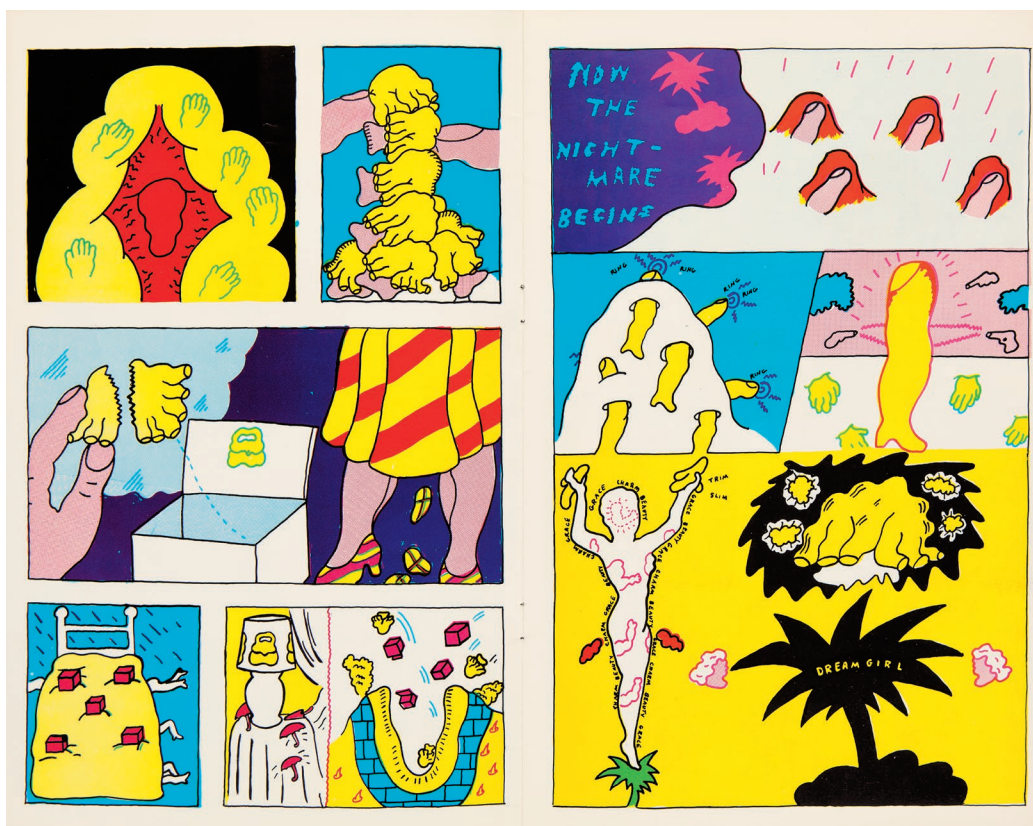


Fig. 9. Pages by Suellen Rocca in *Hairy Who* (1968). Offset lithography on paper. Each page 11 x 7 inches; 28 x 18 cm

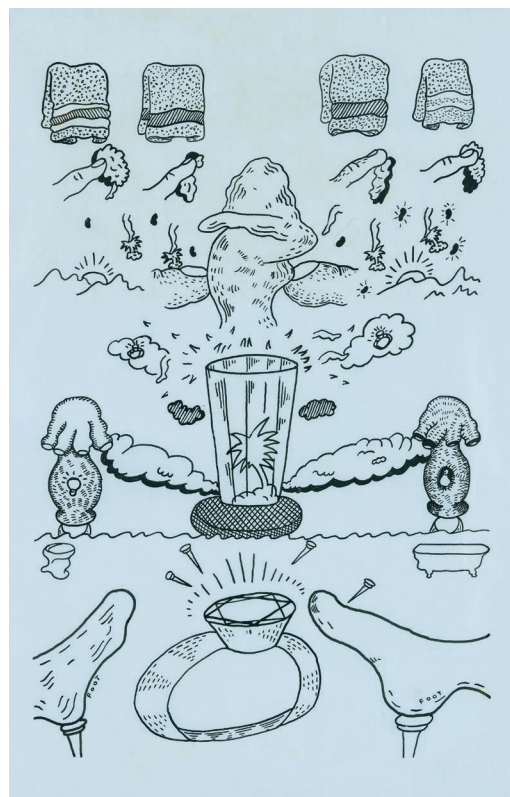
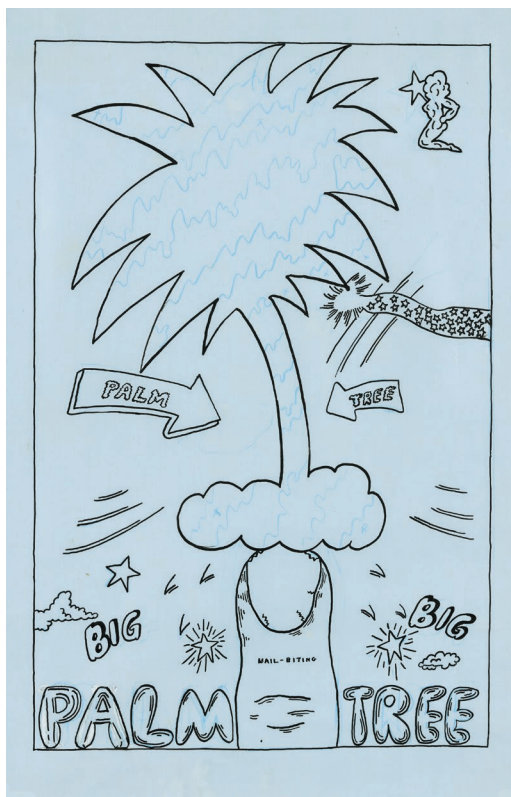
freehand, with little concern for either verisimilitude or illusion.¹³ Her clusters of images, asymmetrical shapes, and list-like obsessional structures were largely inspired by the games in children's activity books, which she remembered from her own youth and was encountering again as a mother, with their mazes, puzzles, and fill-in games. The latter might begin with two highly incongruous objects — a banana at the top of the page, a chair at the bottom — to be connected by drawing a line. If one thinks of Rocca's recurrent objects as parts of a game in which the goal is to get from ring to hat to bell, one can begin to imagine the compositional process at work. Her constellations can be likened to the memory pictures of Chagall, who often painted multiple vignettes in and around central figures [fig. 4]. Other resonant artists include Öyvind Fahlström, who saw the 1967 Hairy Who exhibition in Chicago¹⁴ and similarly worked with glyphs and comic-book elements, and the young Claes Oldenburg, who attended the SAIC from 1952 to 1954 and used rough outlines to transform household goods into uncanny objects. And of course Oldenburg's great influence, Dubuffet, made compositions in the early 1960s that resemble jigsaw puzzles of abstract color forms. All of these artists worked parallel to Rocca at various points, but they don't account for her vision. Like her fellow Hairy Who artists, she belonged to no school or movement outside of herself.

Rocca's drawings and paintings were separate yet related. In both mediums she tended to want to draw with paint. She noted,

I like to work on paintings and drawings at the same time; I like to have a drawing that I'm working on and a painting. At least some of the ideas of the drawing carry into the painting. I never do a finished drawing and then do a painting of it. I never do that or anything near like that. I start out with maybe some sort of idea of some sort of central image that I want to develop, but then the painting happens while I'm painting it.¹⁵

Rocca's later drawings became increasingly complex, almost architectural, like *Big Policeman* from c. 1967 [p. 46]. Her father was an avid bowler, and here she assembled a tiered trophy structure surrounded by the stuff of sports and domestic life — tennis, ice cream cones, a pair of spectacles, snapshots of children. The bottom third of the picture is reminiscent of a game page from a child's activity book, with a human figure composed of irregular shapes, each containing an object — as if to suggest we're all the sum of our remembered parts. As her drawings became increasingly multistructured, Rocca's paintings began to focus more and more on single objects, such as purses and lamps. She also made some of these objects into sculptures for the later Hairy Who shows, in which all of the artists presented various objects — found, made, or altered — in glass cabinets. Her *Lamp Poem* (c. 1969) [p. 73] focuses on just a single object, a lamp with an unmistakably tumescent base and a shade that depicts a cozy-looking home in the distance. It is surrounded by the onomatopoeia of desire, as the painting itself seems to coo over the lamp ("ooh," "ahh," "mmm"). The entire canvas is ringed with ruffles, like a gently subversive household gift.

All of this work found a home, of course, in the Hairy Who exhibitions. The young artists who stayed in Chicago tended to spread out across the city. Some, like Rocca, married and had children. There wasn't a central scene to be a part of, or even a central meeting place outside of school.¹⁶ Recognizing this relative paucity of opportunities for young local artists, Don Baum, an artist and curator who was exhibition director for the Hyde Park Art Center, a community art and education space, initiated a series of group shows in the early 1960s, some of which included future Hairy Who artists. Nutt and Jim Falconer, however, quickly realized they weren't satisfied



Figs. 10 and 11. Drawings for *Hairy Who (cat-a-log)*, 1969.
Ink and colored pencil on vellum. Each 20 x 15 inches; 51 x 38 cm

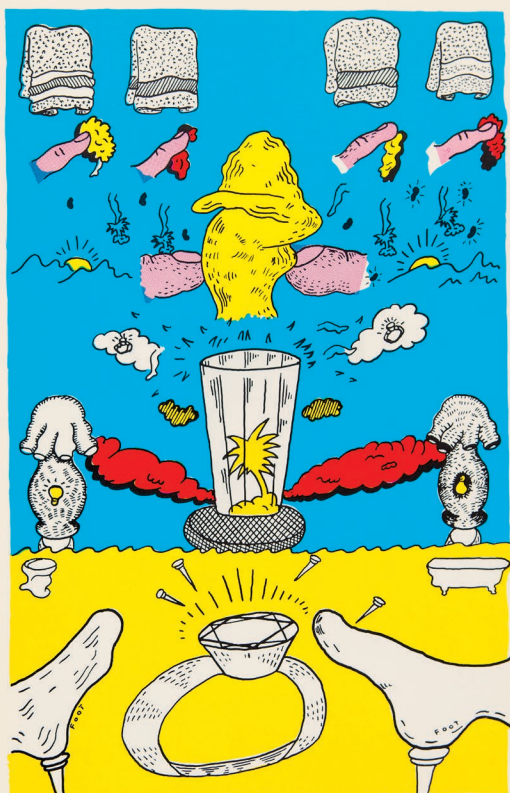


Fig. 12. Pages by Suellen Rocca in *Hairy Who (cat-a-log)* (1969). Offset lithography on paper.
Each page 11 x 7 inches; 28 x 18 cm.

with being mixed in with thirty or forty other artists, some established, some not. Instead they proposed a five-person show. In addition to themselves, it included Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, and Rocca. Baum accepted their proposal but suggested adding Karl Wirsum, who had graduated three years earlier and was certainly a kindred spirit. Thus the group, as Nutt has noted, was formed “not out of a unified, carefully thought-out philosophical position, but rather the need to present our work as powerfully as possible within our means.”¹⁷

The artworks exhibited in these shows were meant to be viewed as individual objects, not as an installation or the anonymous work of a collective. But a shared aesthetic was expressed through the execution of the exhibitions, which included hand-drawn posters, self-published catalogues, laminated buttons, and installations with linoleum sheets mounted on walls, information labels affixed with chewing gum, and displays of the artists’ own object collections [fig. 6]. The four self-published catalogues, which the artists called comic books, were offset-printed, staple-bound publications that contained work made only for print, some of it riffing on exhibited paintings, some of it entirely original. Rocca herself made all new works for the comic books, treating each one as a printmaking project with either two or four offset colors. Sometimes she gave her glyphs their own narratives, as in the oblique stories *Dancing Couple* [fig. 7] and *Poodle Woman*; other pages resemble advertisements for travel destinations or consumer goods of her own creation [fig. 8].

Rocca says, “There was a lot of energy passed between the members of the group, and a lot of someone bringing their interest in a certain kind of thing and opening it up to the others. There was a very healthy kind of cross-fertilization that went on, that produced a lot of positive energy that came out in our work. I think it’s a unique thing that doesn’t happen very often.”¹⁸ The Hairy Who exhibitions¹⁹ found a receptive audience locally and also generated national attention, with Halstead reporting on the shows in *Artforum* and works entering private and institutional collections; Wirsum and Nilsson were shown in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Annual Exhibition in 1967 and 1968, respectively, and various exhibitions inspired by or related to the Hyde Park Art Center shows ran throughout the 1970s.²⁰ As the work found its way outside of Chicago, the group’s influence resonated with numerous other artists looking for another way forward.²¹

Playing the influence game can be reductive on both sides, but it’s fair to say that Rocca’s “catalogue” paintings from 1965 onward, in both their subject matter and their emphasis on simple outlines, exerted a formidable influence on Christina Ramberg’s treatment of sexuality and serial imagery, as well as Roger Brown’s paintings and Ray Yoshida’s Comic Book Specimen collages (collecting was forever a motif in Chicago²² — the mostly anonymous practice of scrapbooking comic strips goes back a century²³). Rocca’s work — idiosyncratic even for the Hairy Who, and without the crisp finish of Nutt, Nilsson, and Wirsum — became very much an artist’s favorite, as Ramberg noted in the epigraph above.

What impacted Ramberg and other artists is exactly what makes Rocca’s work contemporary today. In the past decade and a half, painting and drawing have finally caught up with Rocca’s pluralist approach to form, content, and explicitly gendered subject matter, as exemplified in her *Untitled (pillow, legs, towel)* from 1968 [p. 43]. Here the artist arrays line drawings of legs standing on palm trees and fingers pushing down on feminine heads, with a central image of two fingers touching either side of a towel, itself carrying a pair of underwear. Sparser than other drawings, it masterfully combines her language of glyphs to form seemingly contradictory psychosexual allusions — ideas of triumphant escape are at odds with being literally under a thumb, and the underwear set against a towel seems to signify



Fig. 13. Suellen Rocca and Jim Falconer with *Chocolate Chip Cookie* (1965) [p. 33]

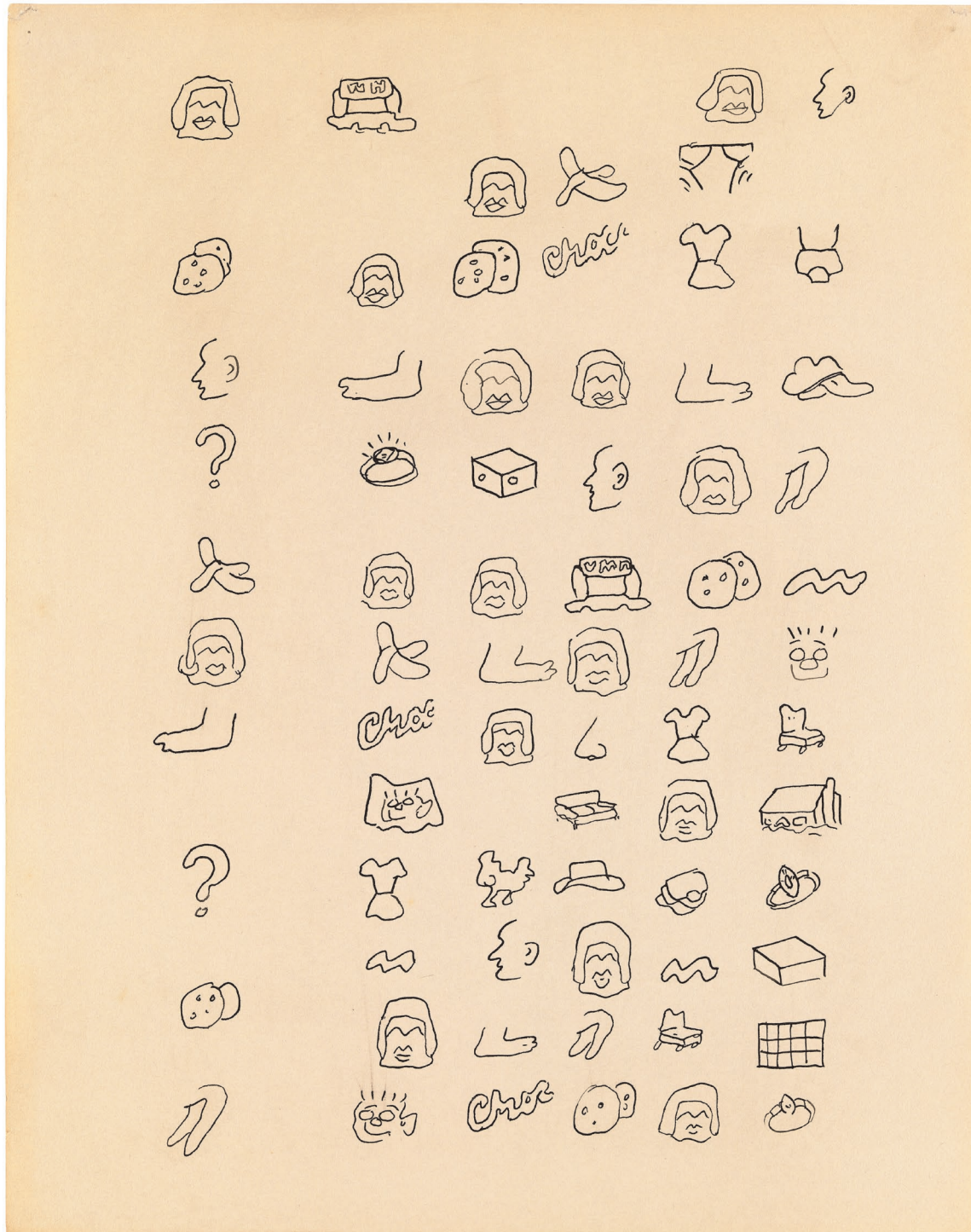
the messiness of sexual relations. Using a homegrown language and working in her own visual idiom without fuss or pressure, Rocca bravely made paintings that explicitly reflected her cultural situation as a young, middle-class, and newly married Jewish woman. When we step back from those circumstances, her body of work becomes a brilliant, complicated, and gorgeous portrait of what it is to be a young woman — then and now.

NOTES

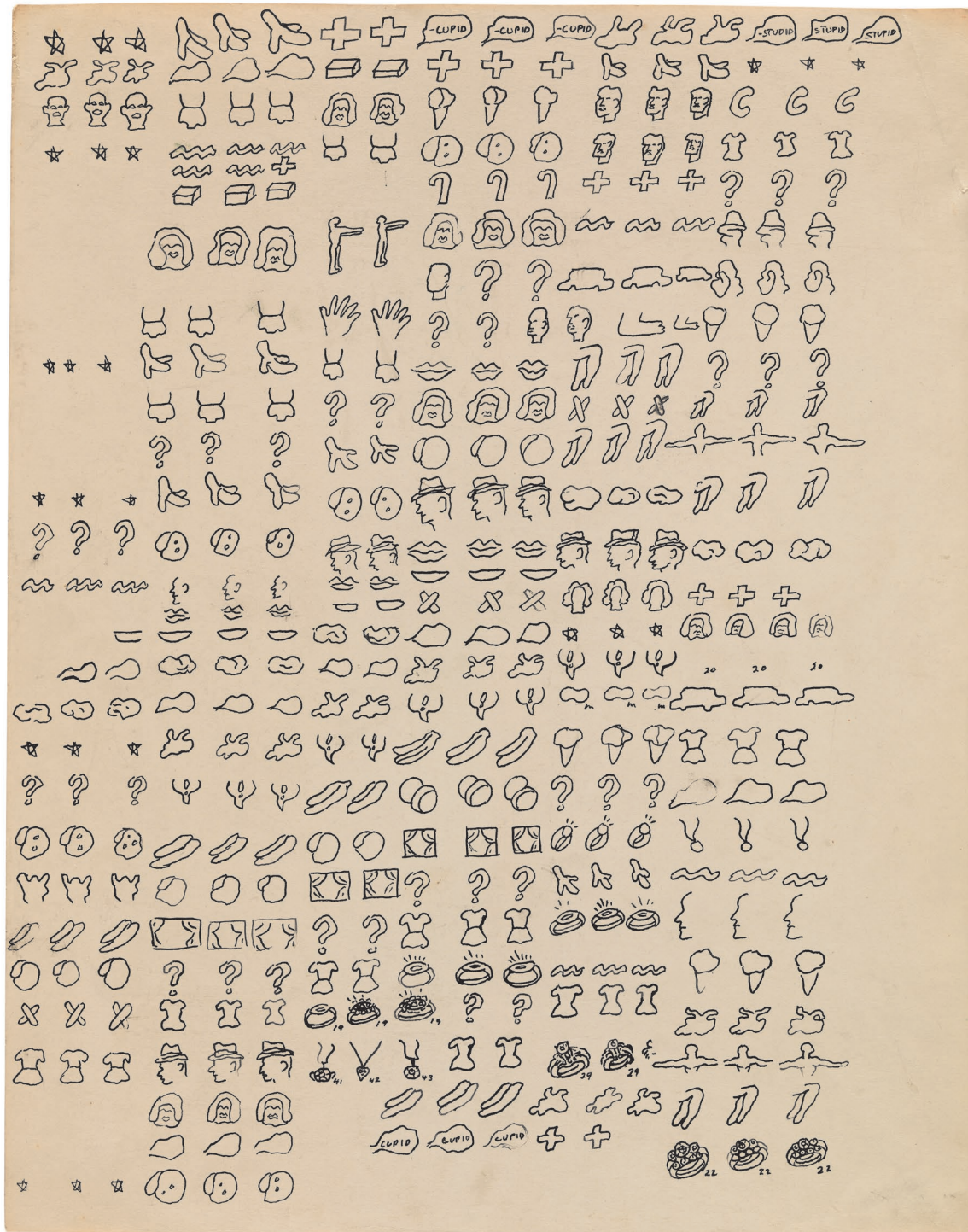
1. Christina Ramberg in an undated journal entry (c. 1968–70), courtesy of Pentimenti Productions.
2. This is in marked contrast to the prevailing avant-garde thinking of the late 1950s and early 1960s, as exemplified by Jasper Johns: “I don’t want my work to be an exposure of my feelings.” The idea of expressive work that pulled back the skin to reveal psychological flesh and blood had gone out with decline of the cultural currency of Abstract Expressionism. Expression, for women, tended to be limited to expressing the “universal,” so the idea of an explicitly female abstract-expressionist approach was highly unusual. Pop loosened things up somewhat in regard to the drawing and painting of personal, female-centric languages — in the work of Niki de Saint Phalle and Kiki Kogelnik, for example.
3. Unless otherwise noted, all Rocca quotations are from conversations with the author, 2015–16.
4. Robert Storr, *Modern Art Despite Modernism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2000), p. 28.
5. Here it is also useful to read Gene Swenson’s thoughts on subject matter in modern art in his important essay and exhibition “The Other Tradition” (Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 1966): “‘Emotions’ have been objectified; perhaps some would say they have been mechanized. The author sees nothing necessarily sinister in this; in fact he finds in it an exciting variety of possibilities of human awareness.”
6. Roger Brown, “Hairy Who Interviews,” unpublished typescript, c. 1980. Courtesy Roger Brown Student Collection.
7. Whitney Halstead, “Made in Chicago,” in *Made in Chicago* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975).
8. “Work by Jean Dubuffet” at the Art Institute of Chicago, May 18 to June 17, 1962; “Balthus” at the Arts Club of Chicago, September 21 to October 28, 1964; “Max Beckmann” at the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, March 12 to April 11, 1965.
9. Dennis Adrian, “Critical Reflections on the Development of Chicago Imagism,” in *Chicago Imagism: A 25 Year Survey* (Davenport, IA: Davenport Museum of Art, 1994).
10. Ibid.
11. It was the famously critical Vera Berdich who ignited Rocca’s love of etching and taught her to embrace the medium as a place for mark-making and diagrammatic drawing.
12. Sarah Canright in conversation with the author, 2016.
13. Her approach to drawing with paint is echoed in William Copley’s treatment of similarly simple objects.
14. See Jim Nutt in “A Hairy Who’s History of the Hairy Who,” *The Ganzfeld* 3 (2003).
15. Roger Brown, “Hairy Who Interviews.”
16. In correspondence with the author, Art Green reflected on his experience as an artist in 1960s Chicago. “None of us were prizewinning students while we were at the Art Institute. Those who won travel fellowships went off to New York, Paris, London. I imagine that my parents thought I had thrown my life away by going to art school instead of doing something practical. The upside to throwing your life away is that, having done that, you’re pretty much free to do what you want.”
17. Jim Nutt in conversation with the author, 2003.
18. Roger Brown, “Hairy Who Interviews.”
19. For a fuller picture of the Hairy Who, see my “A Hairy Who’s History of the Hairy Who,” *The Ganzfeld* 3 (2003); *What Nerve! Alternative Figures in American Art, 1960 to the Present* (Providence: Rhode Island School of Design Museum, 2014); and *The Collected Hairy Who Publications 1966–1969* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2015).
20. Among the shows in which Rocca participated: “The Spirit of the Comics,” Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 1969; “What They’re Up To in Chicago / *Peintre, Leure de Chicago*,” National Gallery of Canada, 1972–73; and “Who Chicago?” Camden Arts Centre, London, 1980–82 (traveling exhibition).
21. In the 2014 documentary film *Hairy Who and the Chicago Imagists*, artists including Amy Sillman, Kerry James Marshall, and Gary Panter speak about the group’s influence.
22. So prevalent that it was the subject of a small exhibition and catalogue that accompanied the 1975 Museum of Contemporary Art Exhibition “Made in Chicago.” *Made in Chicago: Some Resources* documents examples from the collections of various Chicago Imagists.
23. A prime example of this practice can be found in *The Ganzfeld* 4 (2004).

Sugar Loaf and Palm Trees, 1963–64. Color drypoint and mezzotint on paper. $11\frac{13}{16}$ x $8\frac{13}{16}$ inches; 30 x 22 cm.
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago. Gift of the artist





Untitled, 1965. Ink on paper. 19 x 15 inches; 48 x 38 cm

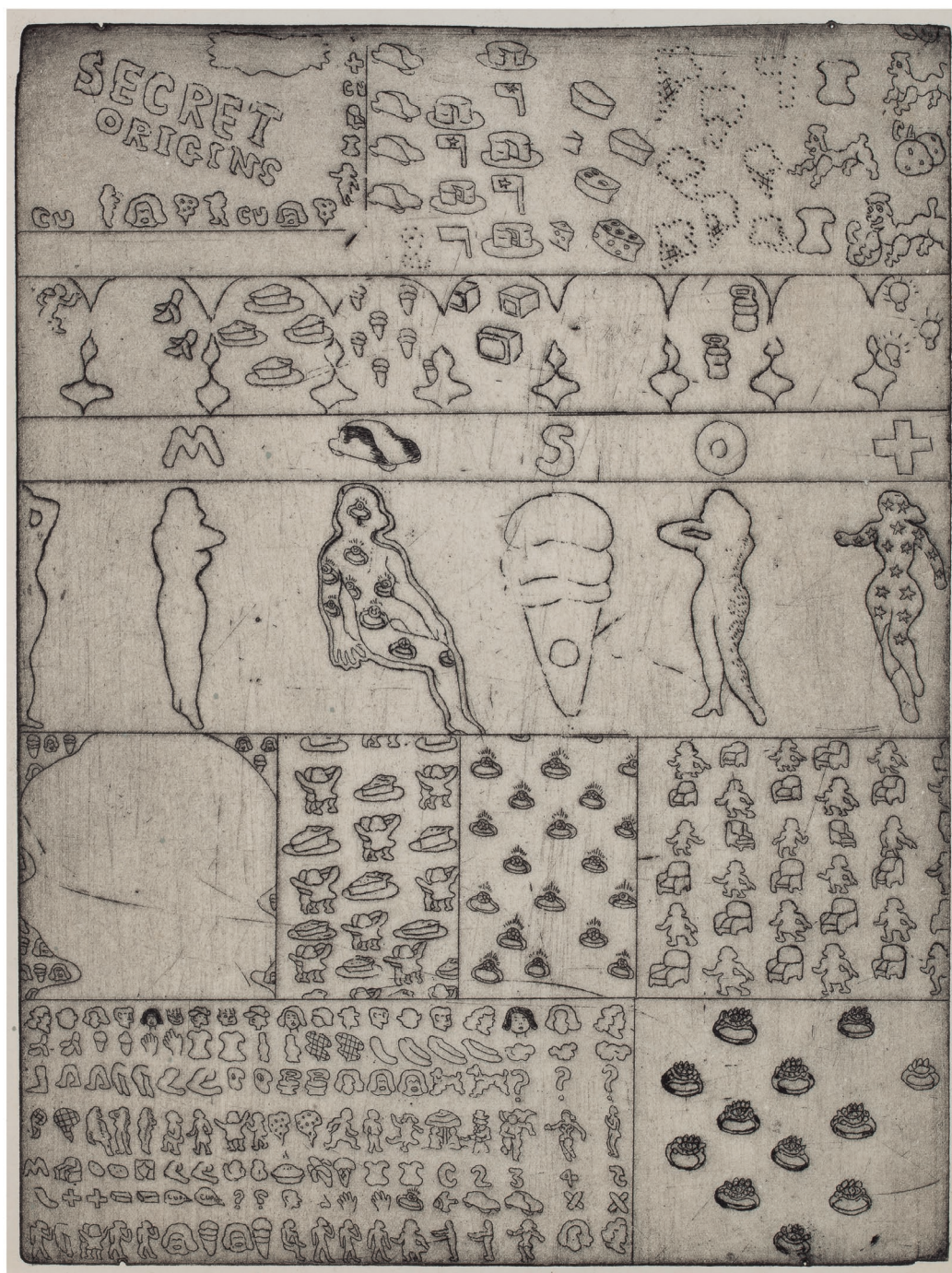


Untitled, 1965. Ink on paper. 19 x 15 inches; 48 x 38 cm



Catalogue Painting, c. 1965. Oil on canvas. 14 x 46 inches; 36 x 117 cm





Secret Origins, 1966–67. Etching on wove paper. 18¼ x 12½ inches; 46 x 32 cm.

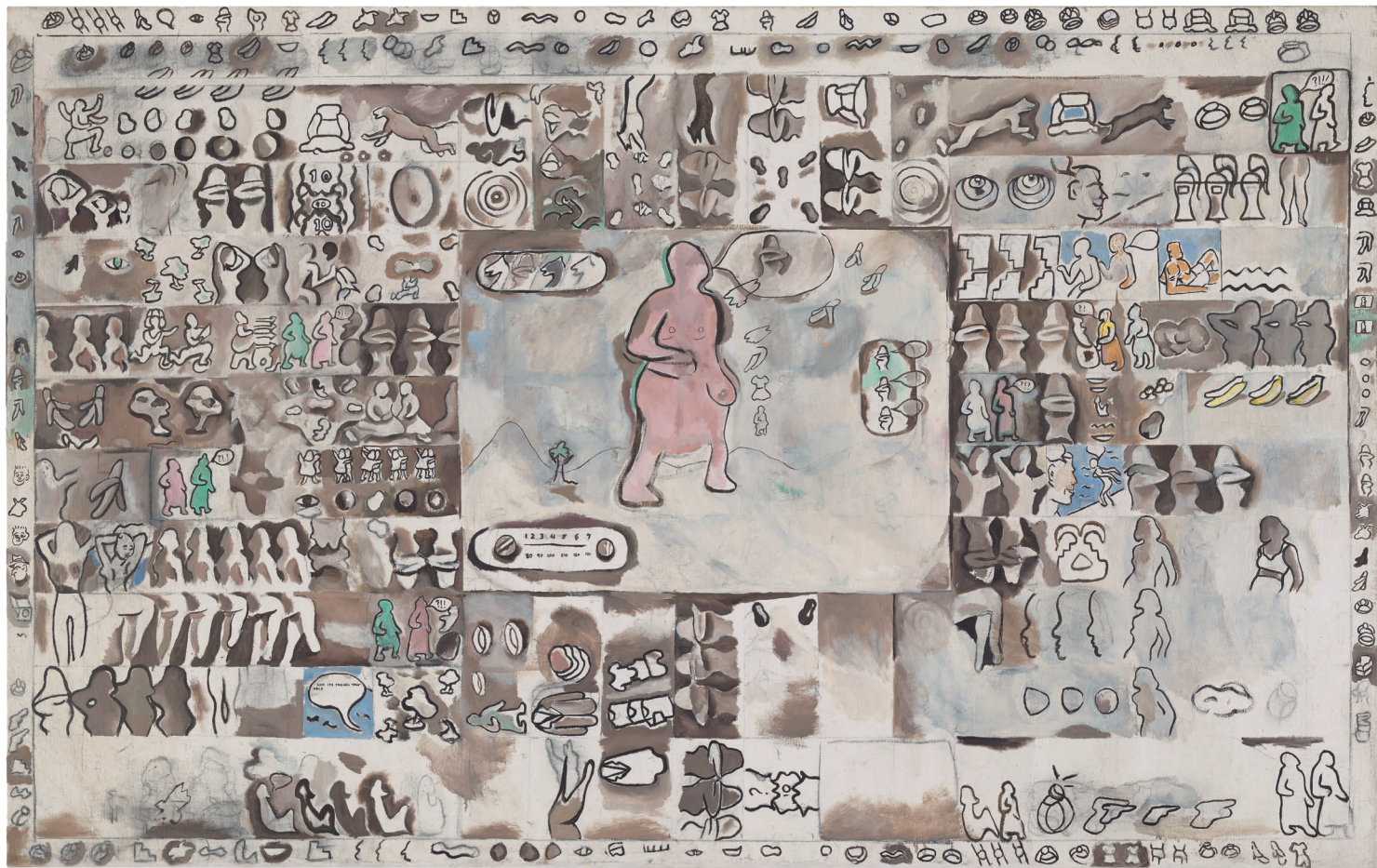
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago. Gift of Dennis Adrian in honor of the artist



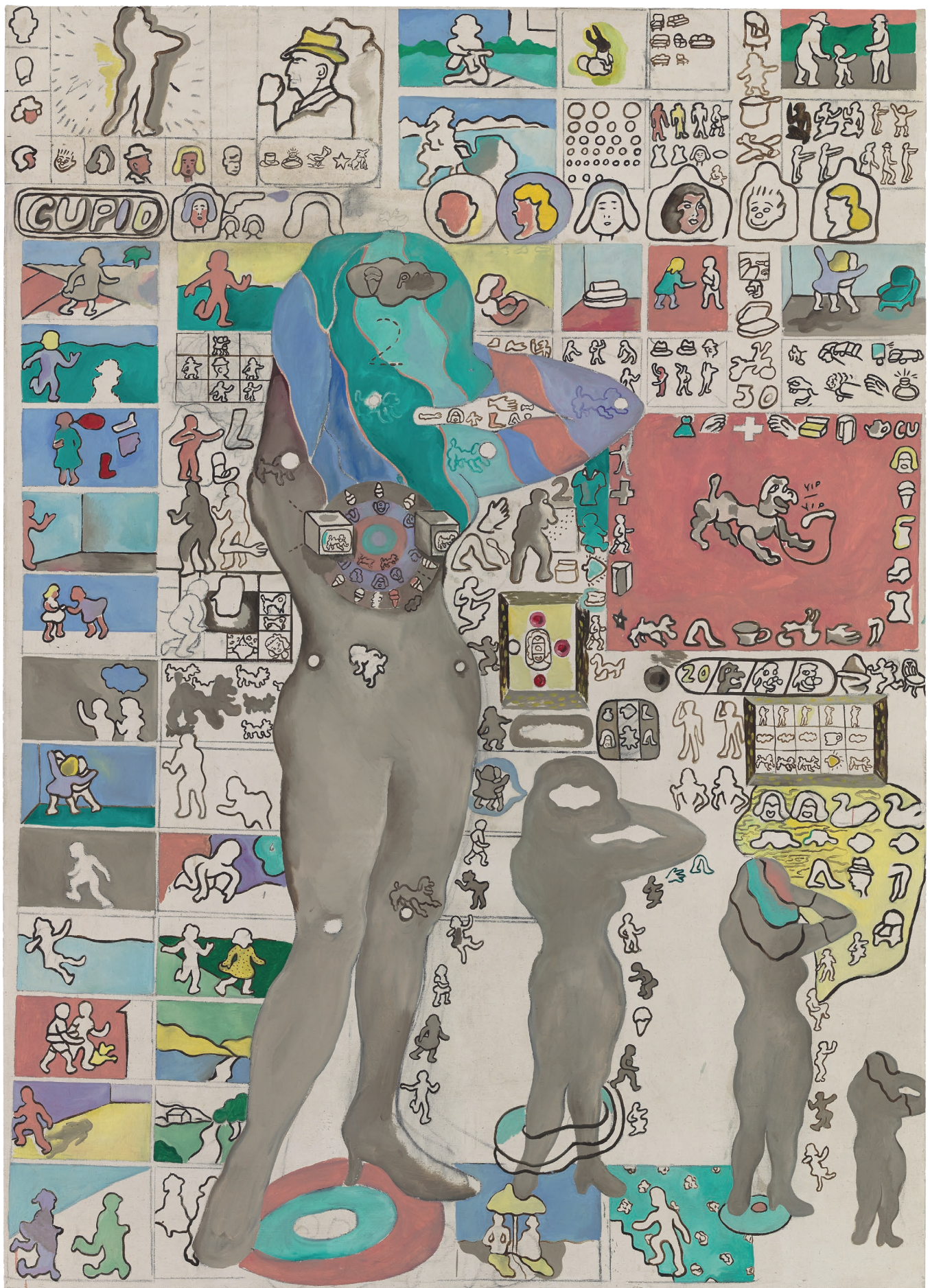
S. Cohen

Bare Shouldered Beauty, 1966. Etching, drypoint, and aquatint on paper. 15 x 21¼ inches; 38 x 54 cm

The Pink Creature on TV, c. 1965. Oil on canvas. 60 x 95¼ inches; 152 x 242 cm

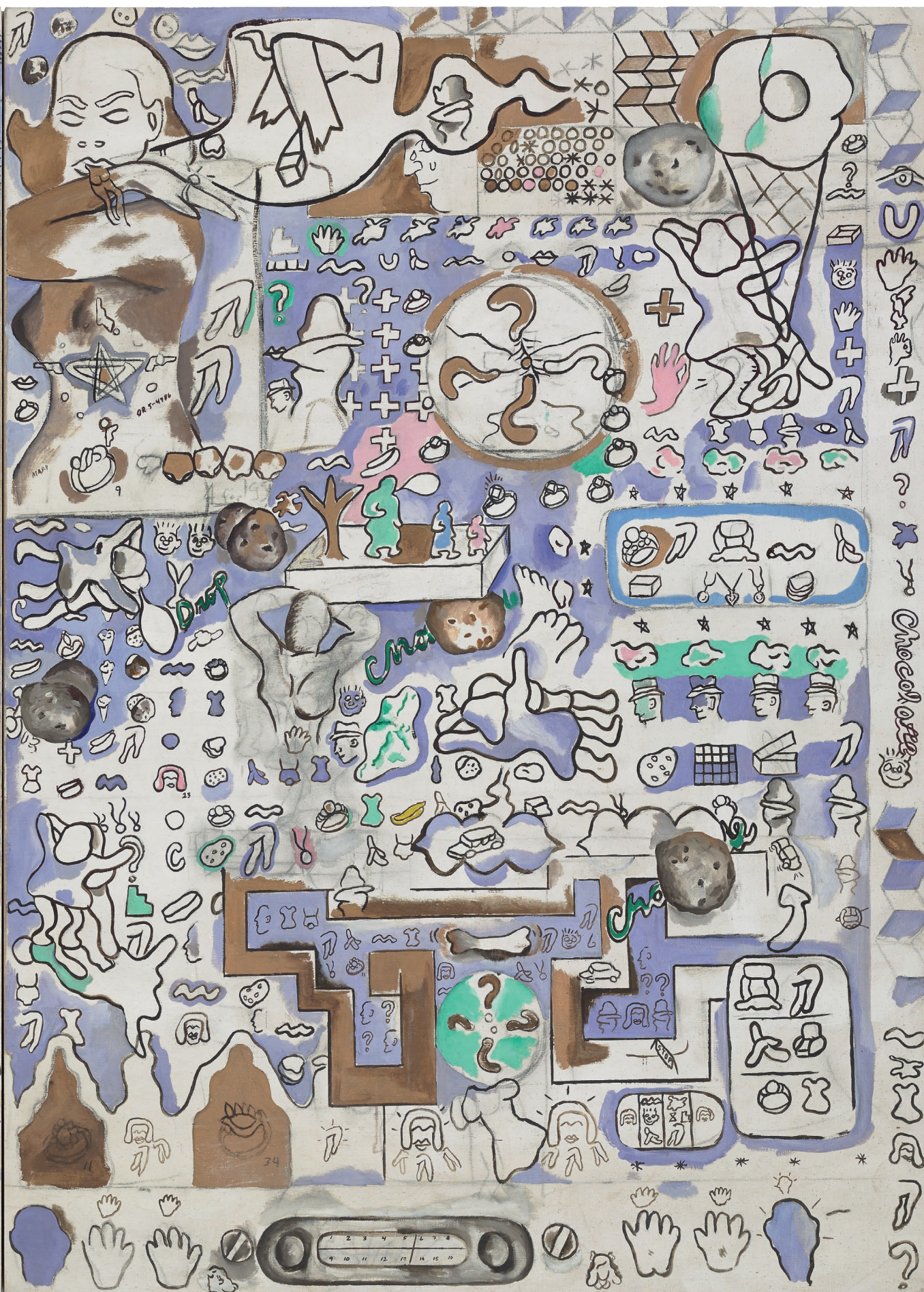


Bare Shouldered Beauty, 1965. Oil on canvas. 83¼ x 59¾ inches; 213 x 158 cm



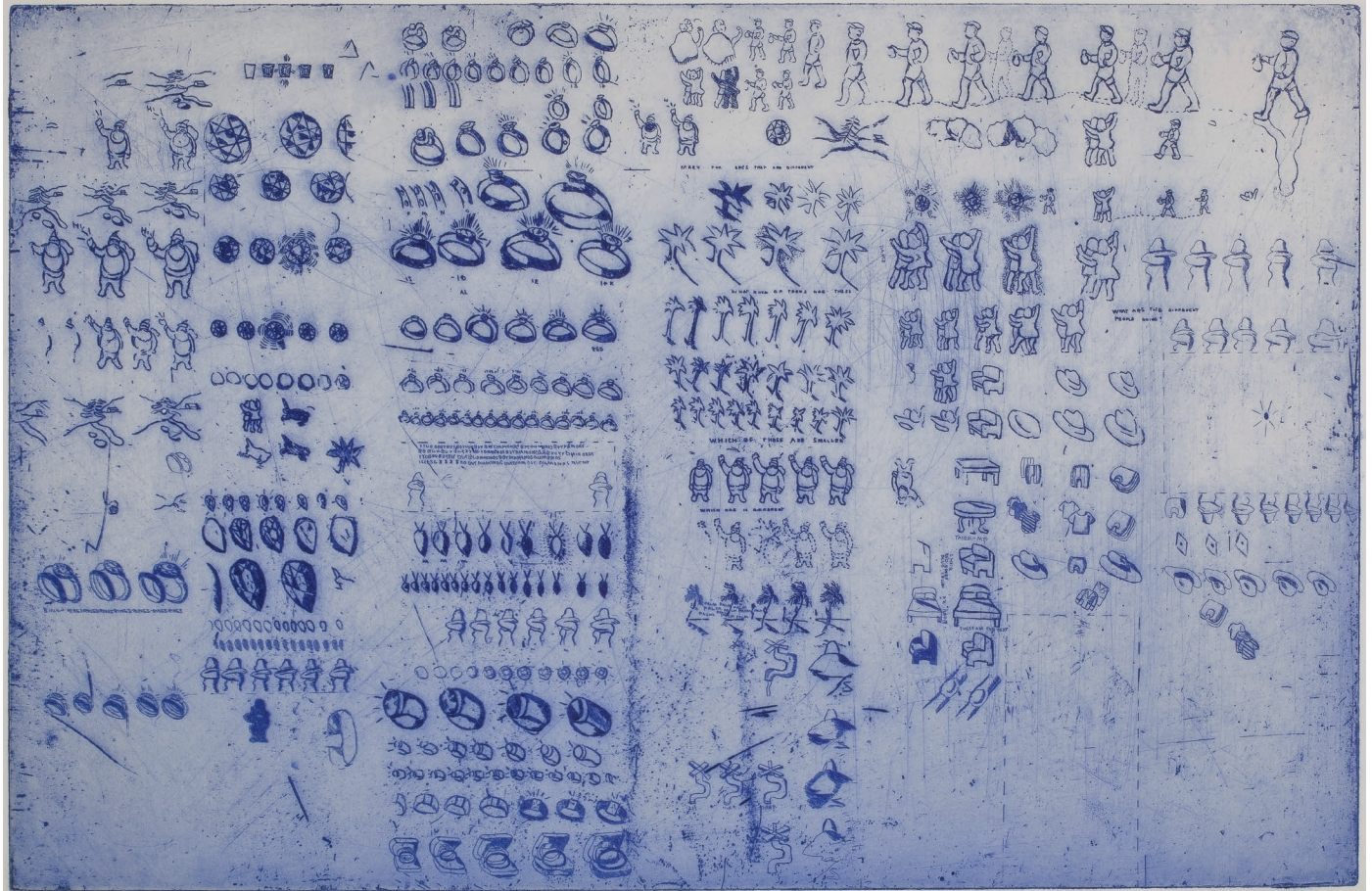
Chocolate Chip Cookie, 1965. Oil on canvas, two joined panels. 84 x 120 inches; 213 x 304 cm





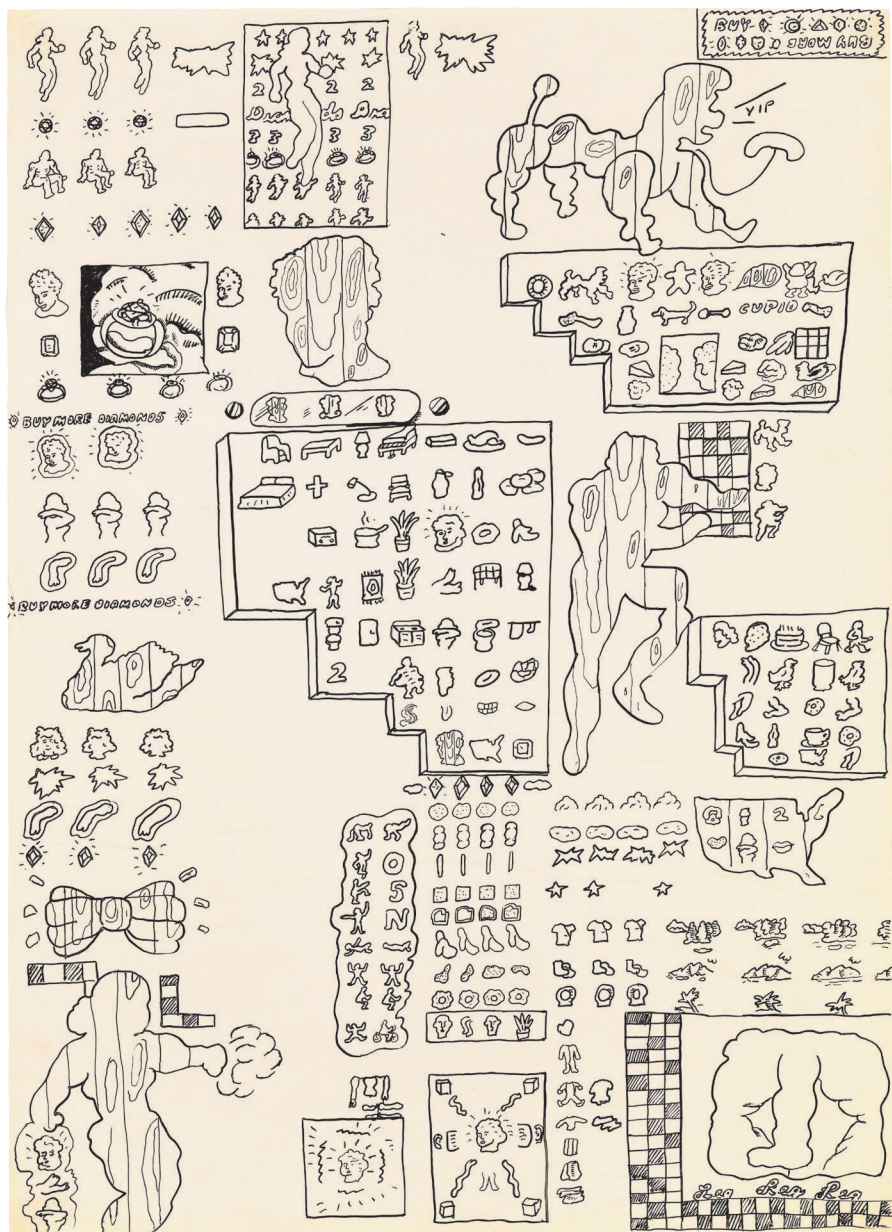


Rings, c. 1966. Etching and drypoint on wove paper. 12³/₁₆ x 19¹/₂ inches; 33 x 50 cm.
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago. Gift of the artist





Ring Painting, 1965–66. Oil on canvas with ring. 69¼ x 69¼ inches; 176 x 176 cm.
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago. Gift of Dennis Adrian in honor of the artist



Buy More Diamonds, c. 1968. Ink on glossy paper. 25 x 18 inches; 64 x 46 cm

Bare Shouldered Beauty and the Pink Creature, 1965. Oil on canvas, two joined panels. 83¼ x 119¼ inches; 211 x 304 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago







Paul's Umbrella Painting, 1968. Oil on canvas. 14 x 14 inches; 36 x 36 cm





Untitled (slippers), c. 1968. Ink and colored pencil on paper. 24 x 19 inches; 61 x 48 cm



Untitled (pillow, legs, towel), 1968. Ink on paper. 24½ x 19 inches; 61 x 48 cm

Lazy Daisy, c. 1968. Ink on paper. 29 x 23 inches; 74 x 58 cm





Big Policeman, c. 1967. Ink on glossy paper. 25 x 18 inches; 64 x 46 cm



Suellen's Corness Painting, 1967. Oil on canvas with artist's padded border and frame. 73 x 50¼ inches; 185 x 128 cm.
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago. Gift of Dennis Adrian in honor of Don Baum



Foot Smells, 1967. Oil on canvas. 19 x 15 inches; 48 x 38 cm.
Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, WI. Gift of Raymond K. Yoshida Living Trust and Kohler Foundation, Inc.



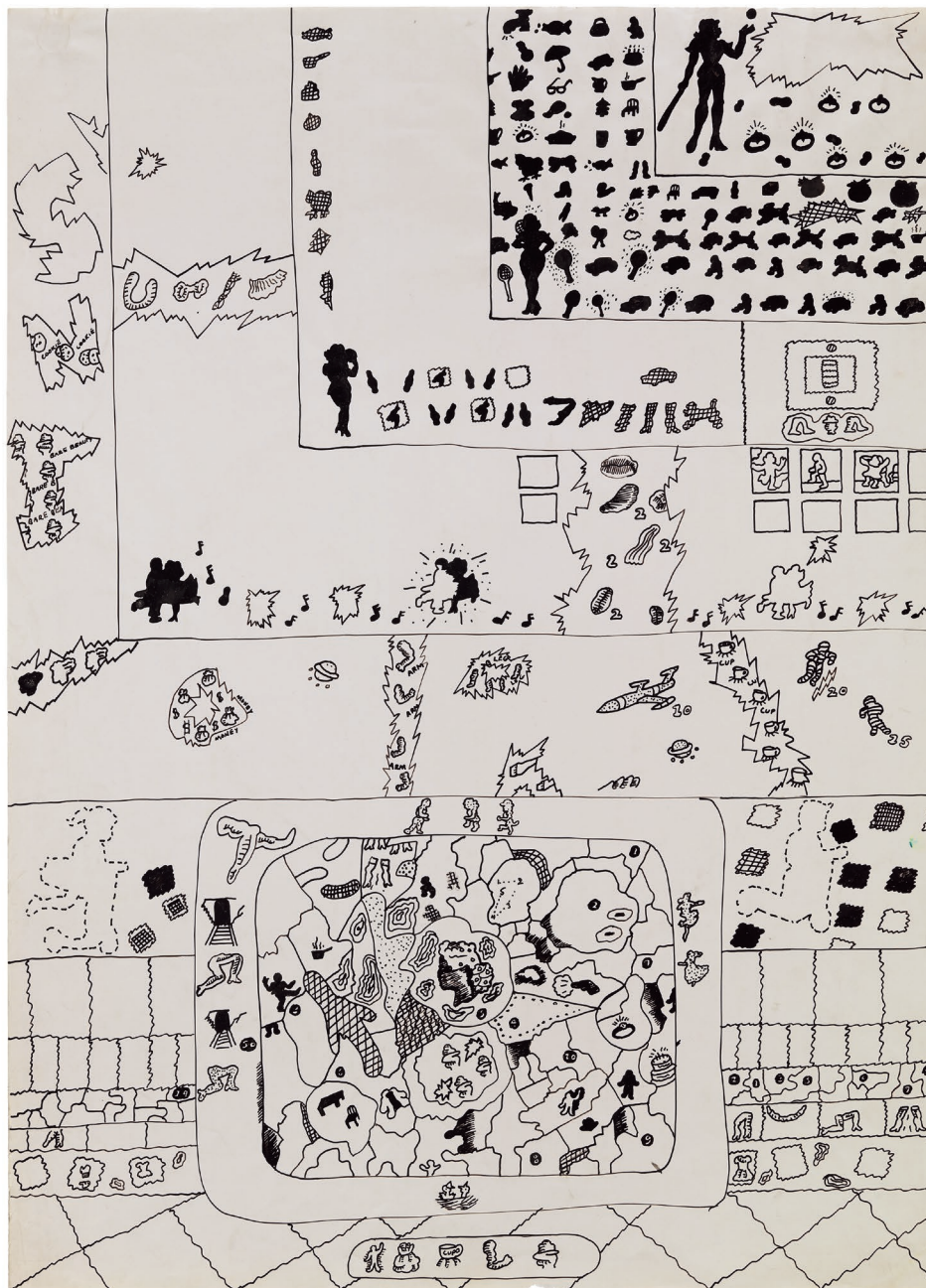
Wiglet, 1967. Etching on buff wove paper. 12¼ x 9¼ inches; 31 x 24 cm



Cha-Cha Couple (Dance Game), 1967. Oil on canvas. 71½ x 67½ inches; 182 x 172 cm.
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago. Gift of Ruth Horwich



Untitled, c. 1967. Ink on paper. 25 x 18 inches; 64 x 46 cm



Untitled, c. 1968. Ink on vellum. 25 x 18 inches; 64 x 46 cm



Game, c. 1968. Oil on canvas. 27¼ x 30½ inches; 71 x 78 cm.
The Bill McClain Collection of Chicago Imagists, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, WI



Puzzle Page, c. 1968. Oil on canvas. 19 x 15 inches; 48 x 38 cm.
 Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, WI. Gift of Raymond K. Yoshida Living Trust and Kohler Foundation, Inc.



Untitled, c. 1968. Ink on glossy paper. 25 x 18 inches; 64 x 46 cm



Handbag, 1968. Ink on paper. 19 x 15 inches; 48 x 38 cm



Sleepy-Head with Handbag, 1968. Oil on canvas. 60 x 40 inches; 152 x 102 cm.
 Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Mr. and Mrs. Edward H. Coates Fund



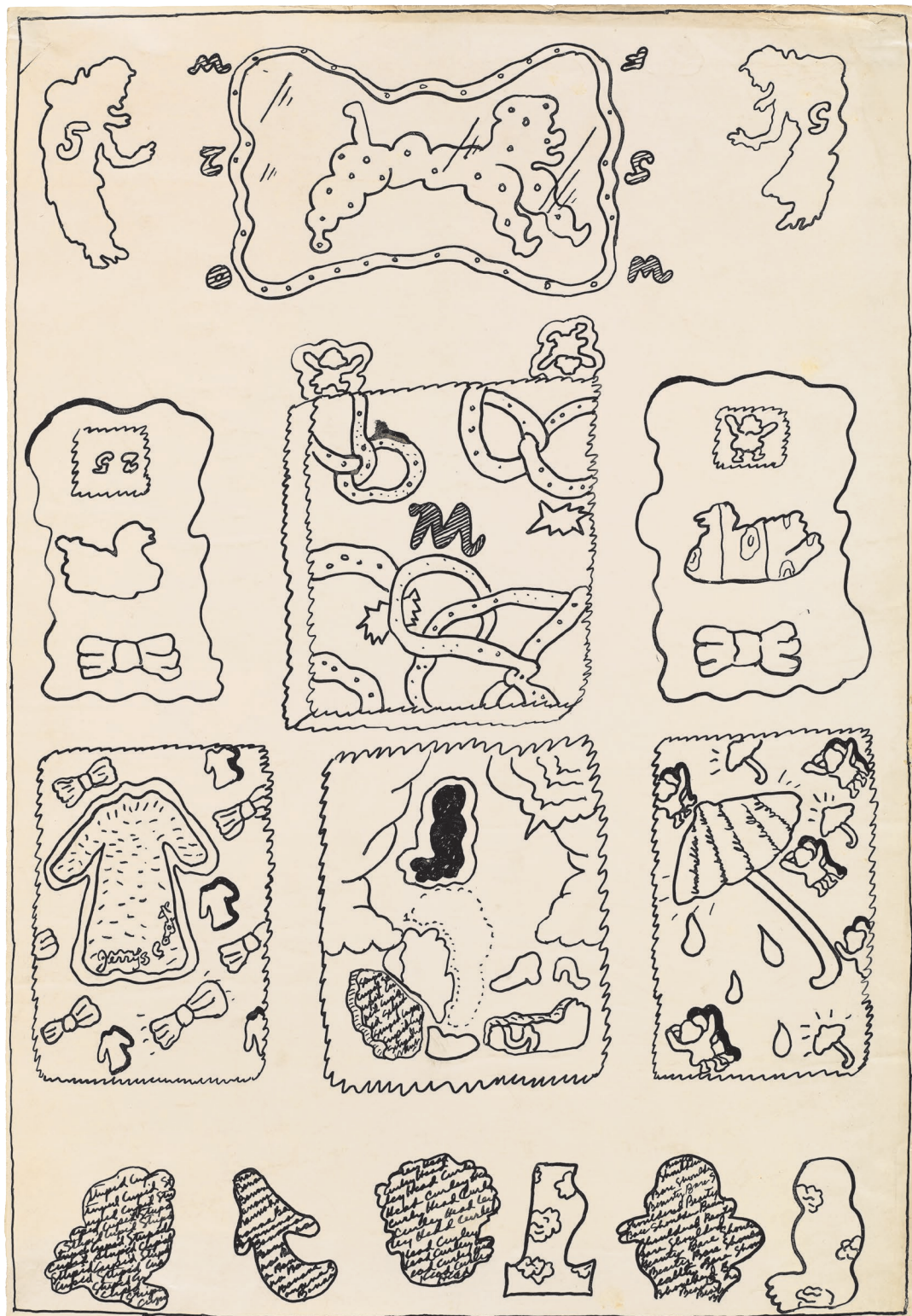
Dancing Couple, c. 1967. Etching on white wove paper. 10 x 8¼ inches; 25 x 21 cm



Night Light for Little Girl, 1969. Oil on canvas with ruffle. 30 x 22 inches; 76 x 56 cm.
The Bill McClain Collection of Chicago Imagists, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, WI



Untitled, c. 1967. Ink on paper. 6¼ x 5½ inches; 16 x 14 cm



Game Page with Poodle, c. 1968. Ink on glossy paper. 18 x 12½ inches; 46 x 32 cm

Palm Finger, 1968. Oil on canvas. 20½ x 16½ inches; 52 x 42 cm



Dancing Curls, c. 1968. Ink and colored pencil on paper. 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches; 61 x 49 cm





Miami Handbag, c. 1968. Ink on glossy gold paper. 18 x 12 inches; 46 x 31 cm



Mm..., c. 1968. Oil on leatherette purse. 4 x 6 x 1½ inches; 10 x 15 x 4 cm



First Kiss, c. 1968. Oil on leatherette purse. 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches; 12 x 17 x 4 cm





Ah!, c. 1968. Oil on leatherette purse. $4\frac{1}{4} \times 5\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ inches; 11 x 15 x 4 cm



Lamp Poem, c. 1969. Oil on canvas with fabric. 18½ x 15½ inches; 47 x 40 cm

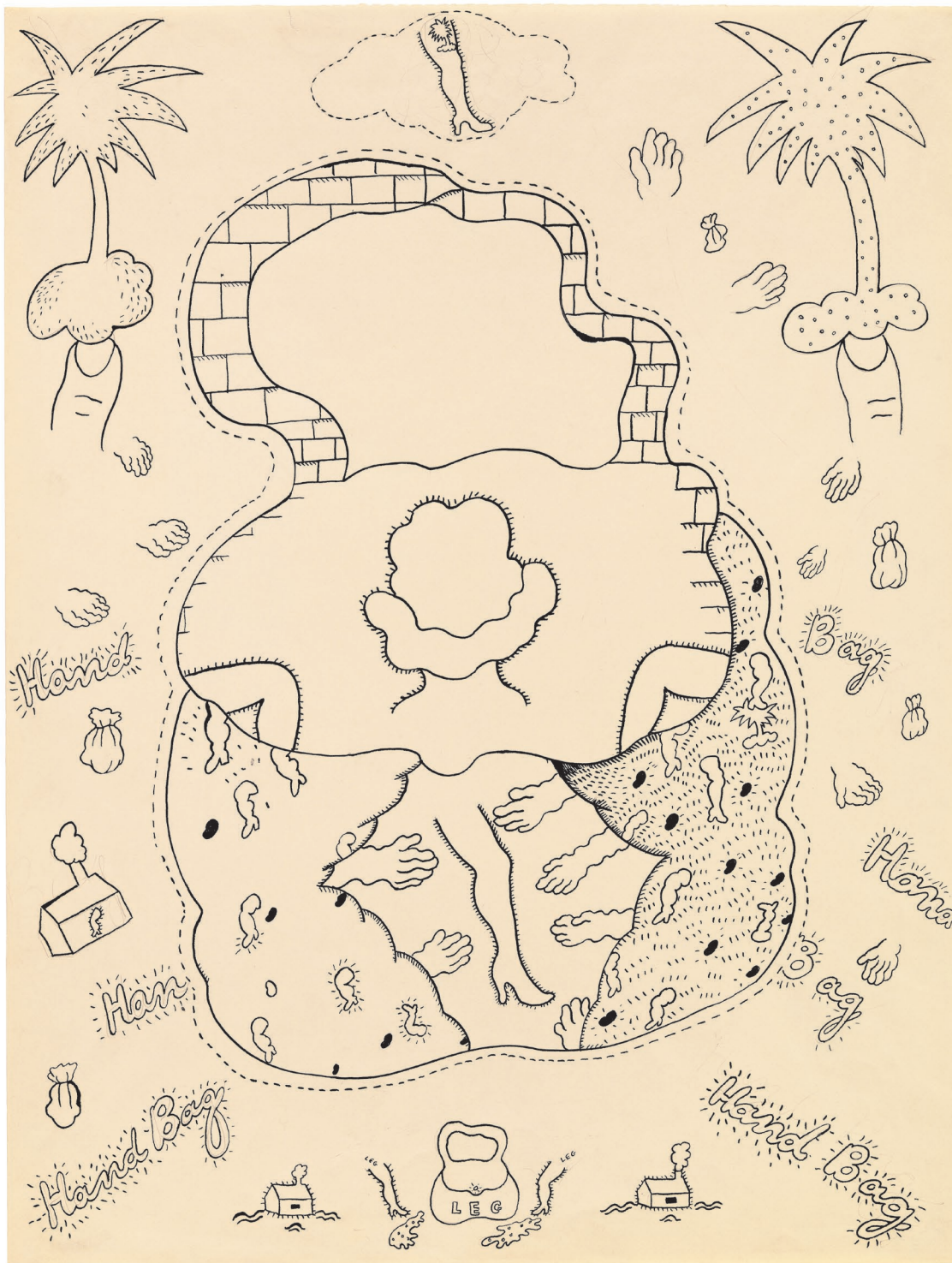


Dream Girl, 1968. Oil on canvas. 60 x 48 inches; 152 x 122 cm. DePaul Art Museum, Chicago. Art Acquisition Endowment

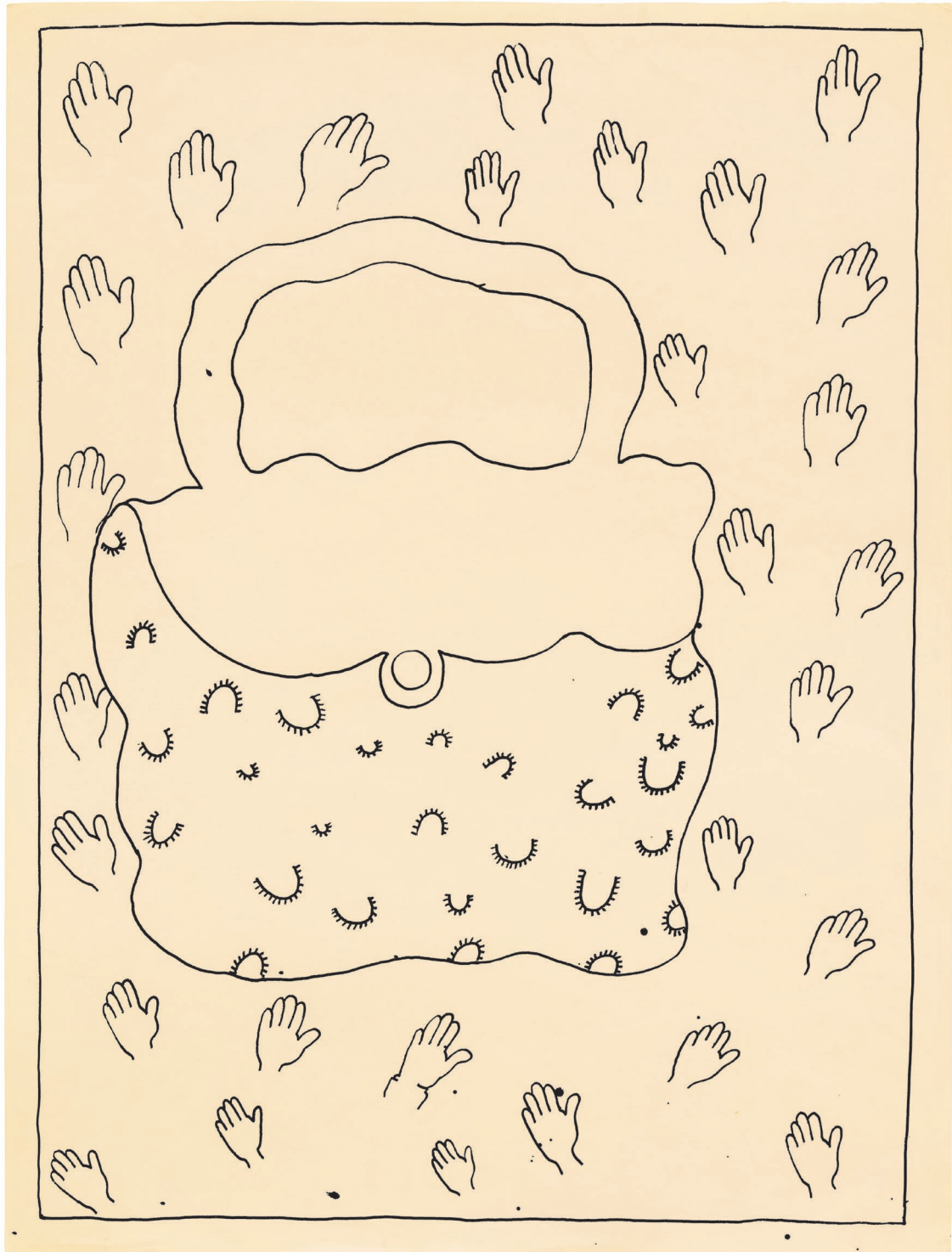


Easy to Handle, 1968. Colored pencil, ink, and cotton on paper. 29½ x 23 inches; 74 x 58 cm





Untitled (hands/"handbag-handbag"), c. 1968. Ink on paper. 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 17 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches; 60 x 45 cm



Hand-Hand-Handbag, c. 1968. Ink on paper. 23½ x 18 inches; 60 x 46 cm



Purse Curse, 1968. Oil on plastic purse. 8¼ x 5½ x 2¼ inches; 22 x 15 x 6 cm





Couplet Song for Suellen and Curly Head Dream Girls of the 1960s

SARAH LEHRER-GRAIWER

The world is obviously overstuffed.
It bubbles, erupts; it is too much!
It comes on steady, it comes on strong,
A barrage of bits and hits that ping and that pong.
Things shimmy, wobble, strut, and sashay,
A delectable spread, a jazzy array on display.

There are glinting diamond rings,¹ ice cream cones, and palm trees² galore.
Chocolate chip cookies, cakes, pies, and so much more.
You'll find presents, poodles, pillows,³ and pianos,
As well as bunnies,⁴ beds, femme bows, and bananos.⁵
Trophies,⁶ torsos, towels, targets, and tresses.
Hats, underwear, skirts, jackets, and dresses.

There are cars, houses, sofas, TV sets, and lots of lamps.⁷
Dollar bills, coin pouches, envelopes, and postage stamps.
Franks and beans, frying pans, and fat Santa Claus.
Pistols, sharp pins, bones, trucks, and saws.
Simple and thick, Suellen's line drawings are kid-friendly and cartoon,⁸
But such sly comic stylings are also euphemistic and able to lampoon.

Puffy clouds and other hard-to-identify padded forms
Don't fit the oeuvre's easily recognized symbol norms.
But a shared sense of buoyancy, weightlessness, and fun
Unites referential icon⁹ and ornamental design into one.
With cuteness and apparent naïveté, her figurines have a retro feel
While simultaneously anticipating today's emoji appeal.¹⁰

Bodies are aplenty, but so often cut up in parts and sections:
Severed fingers¹¹ that drip, droop, and point attention in all directions;
Detached hands that reach, wave, slap, and high-five;
Sexy gams in pantyhose and heels that crisscross and jive;
Feet that are blocky and look like old socks;
Curly heads with coiffed hairdos, a bunch of bouncy locks.¹²

Rarely ever do faces make an appearance where we expect.
Instead we get a lumpy tongue or boxy foot for that Surrealist effect.
Anything or nothing at all can fill that blank space called face —
What matters is the opening up, uncovering, and revealment in place.
The parting of hair frames a sense of passage, entrance, and breach¹³
Where the privacy of self may be glimpsed but stays out of reach.

In fact, the curious temptation to poke, pet, grope, and touch
Extends from orifice and flesh to handbag¹⁴ and clutch.
Surfacing throughout the ordinary dailiness of home life,
We get the libidinal fantasies of a young mother and wife.
Couples that snog, snuggle, hug, and love to dance,¹⁵
Figures of first love, date-going, and starry-eyed romance.

Check out the businessmen wearing fedoras
And the busty broads that they so adore.
The pink creature dreams of bare-shoulder beauties,
Jerking it to posing hotties and pinup nudies.
Peering through curtain after drawn curtain,¹⁶
We're put in the position of Peeping Tom for certain.

Consumer abundance builds to frenzy, celebration, and craze;
Sexual desire and advertising have long been entwined in deep ways.
My attention is split across a hundred little doodads and mascots
Full of cultural associations, personal experience, and narrative plots.
To make sense of such states of distraction and pattern play,
I track the display strategies that are her mainstay.

She likes to order things in loose grids, columns, and rows
That divide flat, layered space with hardly any shadows.
The picture plane is a notebook page to be filled — very graphic.
An inventory spread, a loose table of lists, a diagram of image traffic.
A map of borders and boundaries. Runes, hieroglyphics, and calendar systems;
Archaeological, like a Rosetta Stone or those carved Aztec predictions.¹⁷

Icons are arranged in colorful zones and horror vacui scatter,
Modalities she acquired by studying all sorts of printed matter.¹⁸
Newspapers, mags, ads, and catalogues made huge impressions
As she reflected on her own elementary school lessons.
Placing high-contrast color against a nocturnal black background,
The allusions to chalkboards, classrooms, and asphalt abound.¹⁹

I see kindergarten workbooks and primers in which little kids practice
Writing, drawing, and perceiving connections of logic that attract us.
I see flashcards, sticker pages, word searches, checkers, and tic-tac-toe;
Puzzles, riddles, brainteasers, mazes, and eeny meeny miny moe.
Those pre-readers²⁰ of her youth were formative visual sources,
Juxtaposing pictograms in odd sets²¹ that absurdify the discourses.

Suellen loves games and moving around on flatbed game boards
Like Twister or Chutes and Ladders with playfulness underscored.
It's great! Games gift a clear sense of purpose, challenge, and focus,
Combining uncomplicated objectives, improvisation, and surprise in one locus.
Split screens and scrambled components produce an exquisite corpse,²²
Where puns, sexual metaphors, and pop-culture intuitions can mingle and torque.

Drawing and painting don't stay contained within the frame,
Her energy reaches out, breaks the fourth wall, and takes wider aim.
Canvas becomes object with the addition of fringe, frill, boa, or braid;
Objects become pictures when she paints on purses, pumps, and a lampshade.
For all the iconography, descriptive phrases,²³ and busy compositions put in play,
All the throbbing and neurosis that she drew from the USA in her day,
I'm falling hardest for her chalky paint colors, those electric pastels that attract:
Orange, lilac, pink, green, turquoise, and blue, glowing all the brighter against black.
Thank goodness for this strange, lush palette I luckily fell in,
Such vivid blurs and vague, searching splotches are also key to Suellen.



***Leg Game*, 1968. Oil on canvas.
Approximately 76 x 62 inches; 193 x 158 cm**

1.

From early on, the artist made lots of prints, drawings, and paintings studded with rows and clusters of rings. They sparkle with staccato lines, an amorous twinkle in their diamond eye. Then repetition parodies the romance, foregrounding consumer advertising instead. Suellen met Dennis Rocca in high school, and they married in 1962; she was nineteen. Dennis's father was a jeweler with a big wholesale-retail jewelry store, Rocca Jewelers, on Jewelers Row at 5 South Wabash Avenue in downtown Chicago. Dennis worked in the family business. After classes, Suellen would walk over to the store, just a few blocks from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and they'd drive home together. She absorbed the store on a daily basis, soaking up its atmosphere, spending time perusing catalogues of ring inventory. The whole jewelry district instilled a strong aesthetic sense of ordered excess, ready-made luxury, and standardized design: display cases filled with endless rows of rings pushed into soft black fabric trays — again, the high formal contrast of bright metal charm against matte-black ground was the scene of desire. Sometimes we get the hard sell, and “buy more diamonds” flashes across a drawing. When you're studying with Ray Yoshida, who emphasized that anything at all — “high” or “low,” familiar or foreign, schooled or not — can be an influence, the transformation and incorporation of potent everyday experience into art can happen very fast.

2.

Her most frequently used pictograms come from very specific sources. The palm-tree image traces back to a print ad she saw for vacation travel that remains vivid in her mind's eye. It speaks of vacation, relaxation, holiday, honeymoon, adventure, beach, warmth, tropical paradise, exoticism, fun in the sun, and fantasies of elsewhere. Art is the desire to be elsewhere. Of course, as culturally legible as the iconic palm tree may be, as I write now, some fifty years later and far away from Chicago in my native Los Angeles, the palm tree means differently, both more and less. Icons depend on a certain distance in order to sign effectively — they break down when you get too close. Rocca's palm trees always sprout their explosive, spiky heads from some kind of base. It looks like a tiny island but resembles cloud as much as sand. The scrotal sac for this tree's shaft. Sometimes the base is a three-pronged schlong, a semi-hard tripod appendage, which is pretty much the way she draws bananas, another of her trustiest penis proxies.

3.

Do sleep-deprived mothers of young children dream of sleep? (Rocca's first child, Paul, was born in 1965, and Lia was born in 1968.) Floating amid the commotion, pillows are another mini island of respite and release. Beyond easy associations with sleep, dreaming, lullabies, and home, the pillows are also stuffed full of Rocca's interest in all forms of sack containment and being bagged. Nothing's ever simply nice, exactly; a pillow can be totally smothering and suffocating.

4.

Two things about bunnies. On the one hand, the artist had an Aunt Bunny and an Aunt Happy. On the other hand, *Playboy* was founded in Chicago by Hugh Hefner in 1953, and the first Playboy Club staffed by the famous bunnies opened there in 1960, still a fresh proposition at the time of these paintings. Perky and bushy-tailed, bunnies inject randiness alongside cuteness.

5.

Sexual innuendo and flirty jokes motivate lots of different phallic forms, bananas being only the most obvious among them.



***Blonde TV Girl*, 1968. Oil on canvas.
56 x 46 inches; 142 x 117 cm**

6.

Her fondness for contours that sign “human body” peaks with the trophies, their stamp-like forms condensing so much heroic athleticism and dynamic energy into one sporty pose — fitness in action, the picture of health. What’s more, on a personal level there is a secret biographical sweetness in knowing that the artist’s earliest encounters with trophies and the leisure competitions they commemorated would have been associated with her father, an avid bowler. See *Game Page with Bowling Trophy* (c. 1968).

7.

We are in the bedroom, in a private place. The intimacy of nighttime pulls us in. The lamps are bedside-table lamps with curvaceous decorated bases. Her one-on-one encounters treat lamps like portrait subjects, centered and singular in scale — large. They cut a good figure.

8.

Rocca’s cartoon style syncs up with elsewhere-peers like Ray Johnson and Öyvind Fahlström, anticipating Keith Haring. It vibes with youth (a developing state of mind) and taps the energy of graffiti, bubblegum wrappers, the funny papers, comic books, and later animated touchstones like *The Simpsons*. So much giggly-roundness is disarming; the paranoiac might wonder, is it all a decoy? The kid gloves seem a bit sarcastic, as though cartoonification on its own could make gender roles, social pressure, and consumer anxiety totally easy breezy — as if.

9.

The word “icon” usually comes up in a hurry, though associations with monumentality, celebrity, religion, and aura don’t fit. Icon, rather, in the sense of a self-contained image-symbol with immediate legibility, and in the contemporary, computer sense of small movable pictures or logos arranged on your screen. Ultra-clickable stuff. Communication of meaning is efficient, which is not to say closed-down or unambiguous — the associations that are triggered are both common and personal, overt and covert, conscious and not.

10.

In fact, Rocca’s pictography plays with grammatical sequencing and abbreviation in ways that coincide weirdly with the contemporary paralingual stylings of digital correspondence, such as emoticons, wild punctuation, and hashtags.

11.

There’s a lot of stroking, poking, palpating, petting, and probing curiosity about bodies and puffy masses. The finger is a phallus, a somatic antenna. Touching soft things versus hard, spiny, thorny things like palm fronds, nails, or pins. Fingertips hold palm trees aloft and fix loose objects in place, press doorbell buttons and tickle erogenous zones, squeeze beans and heads and other wormy things as though threatening to pop them.

12.

Women’s hairdos and beauty styles are important, a passion shared by fellow Imagists like Christina Ramberg. Often we get rear views showing the backs of heads, a perspective we experience directly of others but only imagine of ourselves. Rocca was quite taken with those tightly curled ringlets worn by darling little girls, especially blonde ones, in the 1950s. The ones that bounce and dance with every step. She calls them “sausage curls.” They look like thick, half-flaccid tubes with wavy, bulging shafts that end bluntly in a hollow cross section or cap. Hoses, pipes, tunnels, chutes, and elephant trunks that little people and things drop out of.



Unscramble, c. 1966–67. Ink on paper.
13 x 8½ inches; 33 x 21 cm

13.

Often the parting that Rocca pictures is much more corporeal and fleshy than it is hair-like. She returns to the image of cleavage and splitting in hungry fascination: a division occurs, a portal opens up, folds are pulled apart, entry is promised. The folds that reveal the new space are billowing, soft, padded, puffy, and inviting — evoking labia, a swollen cut, window or stage dressing.

14.

Ever notice how her handbags, with their short, arcing handles, resemble padlocks? I just did. Anyway, bags of all sorts suggest metaphoric and anthropomorphic valences in these pictures: interiority, containment, protection, trappings, concealment, mystery, womb, femininity, portability, and softness. Rocca distills the culture's symbols of woman.

15.

There are two principal types of rug-cutters animating her image reel: the more childlike, happy fairytale version (girl with arms raised) and the grown-up version of lovers partying in formal wear, skirts and coattails flying. The latter are having some hot and heavy fun, conjoined in silhouette and surrounded by an ecstatic auratic blast; it can be hard to tell the difference between dancing and sex. She frequently looked to Arthur Murray dance ads in the paper.

16.

The drawn curtains, styled hairdos, and cornice in *Suellen's Corness Painting* (1967) [p. 47] are all framing devices that demarcate a privileged zone, announce a point of view, and open onto depth. The partial view, the element of cropping, adds intrigue. Curtains, as both domestic and theatrical trope within a composition, were also popular with Hairy Who peers like Art Green.

17.

She was exposed to a diverse, nonhierarchical, multicultural, and transhistorical range of artworks and artifacts at the Art Institute of Chicago and the nearby Field Museum of Natural History, which she frequented, as did all students of Whitney Halstead and Kathleen Blackshear. Doesn't the historical-anthropological-documentary function of Rocca's iconography imply our own impending pastness, the dying off of this no-longer world and earlier time in life that she painted?

18.

Other relevant display strategies include slot machines, full-body tattoos, connect the dots, TV control panels and radio knobs, stationery, wrapping paper, wallpaper, popscicle-stick riddles, and educational posters.

19.

The classroom chalkboard was an originary (if now obsolete) site of transmission and reception, learning and acculturation — establishing the primacy of visual communication. As a medium, it is casual, accessible, immediate, and forgiving in its erasability while being formal in its verticality, scale, and presentational function in front of an audience. The black background marked with brightly colored lines teaches concepts of inversion, relative contrast, and negative/positive reversal early on. It models a foundational scene where drawing comes to life as performance and process, simultaneously demystified through instruction and spectacularized as a magic act capable of casting profound spells. Rocca: "As early as I can remember I was interested in becoming an artist." She recalls being set on her path ever since her first one-person show, at the age of eight, when Miss Carlson hung her charcoal drawings in the school hallway.



Handbags, c. 1968. Ink on paper.
24 x 19 inches; 61 x 48 cm

20.

Rocca saved several of her kindergarten workbooks, which she refers to as pre-readers. She continued to use them into adulthood. They proved a fertile and essential source for her art as she digested, morphed, and rerouted pop culture and social convention through personal experience. One of her pre-readers, titled *Fun with Tom and Betty*, has a little girl painting at an easel on its cover; carefully written across the top in a steady young hand is her name: Suellen Krupp. She recalls that, as an only child, going from the protective home sphere into the social environment of kindergarten was an abrupt awakening, a revelation. That age, that first stepping out alone still stirs up a sense of newfound independence — bounding youth, feeling unleashed.

21.

The juxtaposition and scale shifts among the illustrations in her pre-readers made a big impact. She relished the odd pairings and kinships proposed as basic pedagogical exercises, sets of nouns designed to demonstrate classifications like belonging and not-belonging, affinity and misfit. There might be, for instance, a row of three things — a horn, a rabbit, and corn; kittens, mittens, and balls; the moon, a spoon, a bench — two of which shared a logic, like rhyme, while the third played odd man out. Non sequitur and absurdity became instructive visual principles, exposing meaning as a leap of faith while cultivating great pleasure in those transitions where the rational flips into the irrational and vice versa.

22.

Several drawings and paintings have split-screen compositions that divide the picture into an upper and a lower register, juxtaposing two fragments or incomplete views of things. Gridded with discrete cells of hybrid shapes, *Unscramble* (c. 1966–67) [p. 88] generates various examples of the mix-and-match strategy and shows its connection to Surrealism, as well as to comic, pictographic neologism and childhood games like Memory. In the middle of the drawing, a jumble of letters spelling “unscramble” tumbles out of a busted headspace, falling out from under the arc of a lady’s do. Cross-fertilization and pieced-together wholeness are how new Frankensteins are made. Among the possibilities Rocca recorded, we find the basis of forms that reappear in other works, like the child-umbrella amalgam that is refined in full color in *Paul’s Umbrella Painting* (1968) [p. 41].

23.

Simple nouns, exclamatory sounds, and brief phrases pop up in line drawings and punctuate paintings like captions in comics or taglines in advertising. There are oohs, ahs, eeks, mmms, and shhs — sometimes steamy, sometimes scary. Titles extend the artist’s deceptively simple, romantic, and deadpan use of language. Drawings with handbags and pockets, too many hands and stray fingers, are emblazoned with labels like “Easy to Handle” and “Hold Everything” — rather tongue in cheek. She combed newspapers and magazines for choice bits of ad copy or headline. Many of her funniest and slyest phrases were pulled from an old instructional handbook full of crocheted purse designs, which she mined deeply. Titles like *Beau Catcher*, *Lazy Daisy*, and *First Love* alighted from its pages, as well as the bizarre, stilted descriptions written in cursive across her drawing *Handbags* (c. 1968) [above], which charmingly include “festive accent,” “to win you compliments,” “gay and fascinating,” “for that lacy touch,” “very original,” and “quaint but devastating.”



Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Suellen Rocca, and Karl Wirsum. Drawing for Hairy Who exhibition poster, c. 1966-67. Graphite on paper. 17 x 11 inches; 43 x 28 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, collection of the artists

Chronology

1943

Rocca is born Suellen Krupp in Chicago to a middle-class Jewish family living on the city's north side.

Her father, Phillip Krupp, was born in Irkutsk, Russia. His family immigrated to the United States when he was seven, shortening its name from Krupitsky and settling in Duluth, Minnesota. Phillip, one of twelve children, left formal education after the third grade and began selling newspapers to help support his family. As an adult he worked as a salesman at a company that sold and rented lighting equipment.

Her mother, Mildred Krupp (née Sonnenschein), grew up in Chicago and was a talented pianist, performing in public throughout her life. Mildred's father was born in Austria and became a lawyer after starting a family in the United States. He was diagnosed with cancer when Mildred was eighteen, and he died just months later. She took a job to help support her three younger siblings, working as a legal secretary and eventually taking up accounting despite her lack of formal training.

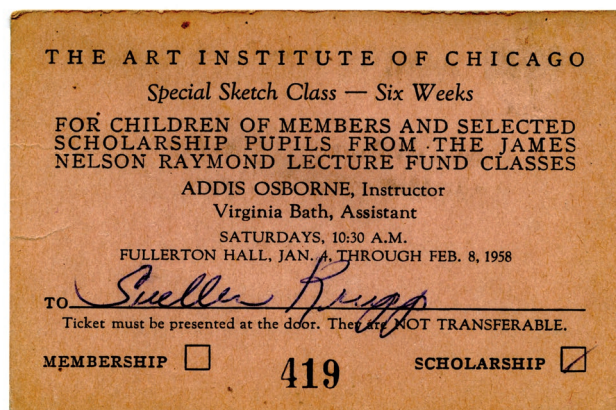
1951

Suellen's third-grade teacher, noticing the young girl's artistic talent, calls her mother to recommend enrolling her in classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. The Saturday-morning classes are held in the museum's Fullerton Hall and include drawing from a life model and keeping a sketchbook, which Rocca works on throughout the week.

1960

Rocca wins first place in the General Federation of Women's Clubs' nationwide art contest for high-school seniors. She uses the prize scholarship to enroll at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. There she wins another scholarship, this one in a competition for high-school students from Chicago's suburbs.

Her first-year drawing instructor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago is thirty-two-year-old artist Ray Yoshida. Yoshida becomes a mentor, advising Rocca and her fellow students to seek their own artistic paths. Her other teachers include Whitney Halstead, whose curriculum focuses not only on the collections of the Art Institute but also on the artifacts of the Field Museum of Natural History. Halstead encourages his students to look beyond the canon of Western art.



Card issued to Rocca at age fourteen for classes at the Art Institute of Chicago



Rocca, age sixteen, in her local newspaper, 1960

1962

Suellen marries Dennis Rocca in November. He works with his father and uncle at Rocca Jewelers, a store in downtown Chicago started by Dennis's grandfather, an immigrant from Italy. The jewelry catalogues Suellen sees there are an important influence on her art, particularly, as she later puts it, "the orderly rows of similar representations of diamond rings that read like a hieroglyphic language."

Another major influence is the iconographic visual language of the kindergarten workbooks from her childhood, "a personal memory of the excitement I felt emerging into the larger world of school as a cherished and overprotected only child."

1964

Rocca graduates from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, receiving a BFA in painting with a minor in printmaking.

1965

Her painting *Bare Shouldered Beauty* (1965) [p. 31] is included in the Art Institute's "68th Annual Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity."

Jim Falconer and Jim Nutt propose a five-person exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center featuring themselves, Rocca, Art Green, and Gladys Nilsson — all recent graduates of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The center's exhibition director, Don Baum, accepts their proposal and suggests adding Karl Wirsum, who graduated from the school in 1961. At the six artists' first meeting, they name themselves the Hairy Who.

Rocca's son, Paul, is born on May 6.

1966

The first Hairy Who exhibition opens at the Hyde Park Art Center (February 25 to April 9). To accompany their individual artworks, the six artists collaborate on a twenty-page staple-bound publication, which they refer to as a comic book, featuring drawings by each artist.

Rocca is also included in "The Toy Show" at the Hyde Park Art Center (November 11 to December 17) and designs the exhibition poster.

1967

The Hyde Park Art Center hosts the second Hairy Who exhibition (February 24 to March 24). Like the first, it is accompanied by a publication, this time a thirty-two-page comic book titled *The Hairy Who Sideshow*. The book and the promotional poster both feature exquisite-corpse drawings made by five of the artists (Green, Nilsson, Nutt, Rocca, and Wirsum).

Rocca's painting *Curley Head* (c. 1966) is included in the Art Institute of Chicago's "70th Annual Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity" (March 3 to April 2), where it is awarded the Mr. and Mrs. Frank H. Armstrong Prize of three hundred dollars.



The artist's son, Paul, in front of her painting
Bare Shouldered Beauty (1965) [p. 31]



The Hairy Who in *Panorama*, supplement of the
Chicago Daily News, March 11, 1967



Suellen's *Corness Painting* (1967) [p. 47] in "Hairy Who" at Dupont Center, Corcoran
Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1969, with a painted lawn chair by Karl Wirsum,
watercolors by Gladys Nilsson, and a painting by Jim Nutt

1968

The third Hairy Who exhibition, accompanied by a sixteen-page comic book, opens at the Hyde Park Art Center (April 5 to May 11). A week before it closes, another Hairy Who exhibition opens at the San Francisco Art Institute (May 3 to 29).

Rocca's drawing *Handbag* (1968) is included in the Art Institute of Chicago's "71st Annual Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity" (March 30 to May 12).

Rocca's daughter, Lia, is born on May 6. The artist will later recall, "I was this young mother making these paintings. It was a wonderful period. My son would take a nap and I'd rush to my knotty pine studio and work on a painting. Having a toddler and a baby, and all these exciting shows, it was wonderful. It was a happy time."

1969

At the Dupont Center at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, Walter Hopps curates the final Hairy Who exhibition (April 15 to May 17). It is accompanied by a sixteen-page comic book titled *Hairy Who (cat-a-log)*.

Rocca is included in the group exhibitions "Don Baum Sez 'Chicago Needs Famous Artists'" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (March 8 to April 13) and "The Spirit of the Comics" at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (October 1 to November 9).

1970

The exhibition "Marriage Chicago Style" — featuring Rocca, Sarah Canright, Ed Flood, Ed Paschke, Barbara Rossi, and Karl Wirsum — opens at the Hyde Park Art Center (February 13 to March 14).

1971

The same artists — Rocca, Canright, Flood, Paschke, Rossi, and Wirsum — organize a return exhibition, "Chicago Antigua," at the Hyde Park Art Center (March 19 to April 17).

1972

Rocca is included in the group exhibition "Chicago Imagist Art" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (May 13 to June 25), which travels to the New York Cultural Center later in the summer.

Rocca and her family move to the San Francisco Bay Area. A few years later she and her husband divorce. During this period she stops making art.

1972–73

Rocca is included in "What They're Up To in Chicago / *Peintre, Leure de Chicago*," a group exhibition organized by the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, which travels to venues throughout Canada.



Suellen Rocca's page for *Dis is THE* catalog (1969), a stapled price list the Hairy Who produced for their exhibition at the Dupont Center, including *Bare Shouldered Beauty* [p. 31], *Purse Curse* [pp. 80–81], *Leg Game* [p. 86], and *Blonde TV Girl* [p. 87]

1980–82

Rocca is included in the exhibition “Who Chicago?”, which opens at the Camden Arts Centre in London on December 10, 1980, and travels to the Sunderland Arts Centre, the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow, the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh, and the Ulster Museum in Belfast.

1981

Moving back to Chicago with her two children, Rocca resumes making art and begins teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s Division of Continuing Studies.

1983

Rocca has a solo exhibition at Phyllis Kind Gallery in Chicago.

The exhibition “From Chicago” — featuring works by Rocca, Roger Brown, Philip Hanson, Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, H. C. Westermann, and Karl Wirsum — opens at the Pace Gallery in New York (January 15 to February 13).

Rocca takes a job as an instructor at Elmhurst College, a four-year liberal-arts college in the Chicago suburb of Elmhurst, a position she holds for ten years.

1987

Rocca is included in the group exhibition “Drawings of the Chicago Imagists” at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (October 4 to November 14).

1993

Rocca becomes program director at Art Resources in Teaching (ART), a social-services organization originally established in the nineteenth century as the Chicago Public School Art Society at Hull House, on Chicago’s near west side. She oversees a program that coordinates visits by working artists to Chicago elementary schools.

2000

Rocca is included in the group exhibition “Chicago Loop: Imagist Art 1949–1979” at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County, in Stamford, Connecticut (September 15 to December 6).

2002

Rocca is included in the group exhibition “Made in Chicago: Circa 1970” at Adam Baumgold Gallery in New York (October 17 to November 30).

2006

Returning to teaching at Elmhurst College, Rocca is appointed director of the Art Exhibition and Visiting Artist Program and curator of the college’s outstanding collection of Chicago Imagist art, the largest public collection of its kind.



Poster for the exhibition "Chicago Antigua" at the Hyde Park Art Center, 1971



Poster for the exhibition "Marriage Chicago Style" at the Hyde Park Art Center, 1970

2007

The exhibition “Suellen Rocca & Art Green: Imagist Classic Hits, Vol. 1” opens at Corbett vs. Dempsey gallery in Chicago (February 23 to March 31).

2012

Rocca is included in the group exhibition “Of, To, and From Ray Yoshida” at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia (April 7 to July 8).

2013

Rocca is the subject of the exhibition “Focus 4: Suellen Rocca” at the Illinois State Museum Chicago Gallery (February 25 to June 21).

2014

The documentary film *Hairy Who and the Chicago Imagists*, which tells the story of Rocca and her contemporaries, is released by Pentimenti Productions. It features interviews with more than forty critics, curators, and artists, including Rocca.

2014–15

Rocca is included in the group exhibition “What Nerve! Alternative Figures in American Art,” curated by Dan Nadel for the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in Providence (September 19, 2014, to January 4, 2015), which travels to Matthew Marks Gallery in New York (June 7 to August 14, 2015).

2015

The Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art interviews Rocca for its oral-history collection.

2016

Rocca receives an honorary doctorate from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago alongside the other Hairy Who artists.

Rocca currently lives and works in Romeoville, Illinois.

Written by Craig Garrett with research by Dan Nadel.



Suellen Rocca at the opening of the first Hairy Who exhibition,
Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, 1966

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Cover: *Palm Finger*, 1968. Oil on canvas.

20½ x 16½ inches; 52 x 42 cm

Frontispiece: *Bare Shouldered Beauty* (detail), 1965.

Oil on canvas. 83¼ x 59¾ inches; 213 x 158 cm